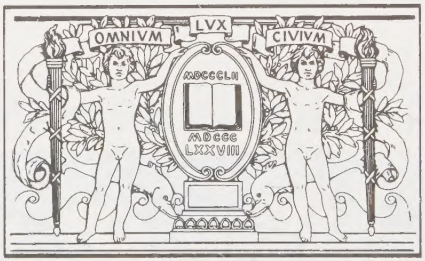
CREDE
BYRON



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CREDE BYRON

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CREDE BYRON

A Play

BY

FANNY HEASLIP LEA

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
NEW YORK MCMXXXVI

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By FANNY HEASLIP LEA
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". . . and there fell a great star from Heaven burning as it were a lamp."

CREDE BYRON

SCENES

PROLOGUE

Wood between Newstead Abbey and Annesley. 1804

ACT 1

SCENE 1	A room in Reddish's Hotel, London.	1811
2	Anteroom to the House of Lords.	1812
3	Drawing room at Melbourne House.	1812
4	Byron's room, St. James's Street.	1812
5	Heathcote House.	1813

ACT 2

SCENE 1	Drawing room at Seaham.	1814
2	Drawing room at 13 Piccadilly Terrace.	1816
3	Drawing room at 13 Piccadilly Terrace.	1816
EPILOGUE	Hobhouse's study. London.	1823
	Missolonghi.	1824

CHARACTERS

Augusta Byron
Byron
Mary Chaworth
Maid
Fletcher
Dallas
Hobhouse
Doorman
First Lord
Second Lord
Third Lord
Fourth Lord
Lady Oxford
Lady Melbourne
Lady Caroline Lamb
Tom Moore
William Lamb
Annabella Milbanke
George Leigh
Jackson
Lady Heathcote
Mrs. Clermont
Lady Milbanke
Sir Ralph Milbanke
Robbins
Rector
Dr. Bruno
Dr. Milligen
Gamba
Major Parry
Lucca

(footmen and guests)

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Scene

A wood between Newstead Abbey and Annesley.
TIME: *1804.*
An idyllic bit of spring woodland. To the right a great oak whose low-hanging branches shade an old fence with a gate swinging loose. To the left clustered young trees from the midst of which a path runs to the foot of the oak. There is a wide patch of bluebells at the end of the path. Sunlight sifts through onto the path. Bluebells and oak are in shadow.
When the curtain rises two voices are heard approaching from the left. Those of a boy of sixteen and a young woman five or six years older. He is protesting vehemently. She is trying to quiet him. Their words are not distinctly heard but the implications are unmistakable. After a moment or so they appear at the bend of the path and come down to the foot of the oak. It is BYRON *and his half-sister* AUGUSTA. *He limps slightly.*

AUGUSTA [*soothingly*] Byron . . . Byron . . . not so violent! What good can it do?

BYRON [*fiercely*] Am I to call that woman mother?

AUGUSTA. When she is in one of her rages I believe she scarcely knows herself what she is saying. And after all —you do owe her respect.

BYRON [*with bitter laughter*] I may owe her respect as a son but I renounce her as a friend. What example does she show me? I hope in God I shall never follow it!

AUGUSTA. Is today a sample of her ordinary behaviour to you?

BYRON. I tell you her disposition is diabolical. I dread the approach of the holidays more than most boys dread their return from them.

AUGUSTA. My poor brother. I could almost think she hates you for being our father's son.

BYRON. She rakes my father's ashes. Within the last hour I have heard not only myself but my whole family —on the father's side—slandered in words you would be shocked to hear.

AUGUSTA. Such unhappy fury. Afterwards she must know what injustice she does you.

BYRON. Long ago she cursed me for a lame brat. I said "I was born so, mother."

AUGUSTA. She should have died for shame.

BYRON. She loves rough talk as she loves strong drink. And a talkative woman, my pretty sister, is like an adder's tongue. So says one of the prophets. Which I can't tell you and very likely you don't wish to know— but he was a true one whoever he was.

AUGUSTA. Do not think of her more than you can help.

BYRON. I disclaim her from this time. I look to you— at least my half sister—as my nearest relation.

AUGUSTA. Trust me.

BYRON. A relation whom I love . . . a friend in whom

I can confide. Fortune sufficiently atones.

AUGUSTA. My poor Byron! And tomorrow I leave you. After I have gone write me what you please . . . anything . . . everything . . . I will burn your letters.

BYRON [*quick change of tone*] If you do I shall be monstrous angry. . . .

AUGUSTA [*amiably*] Then as you please. Only trust me. You have said yourself you have no one else.

BYRON. I have plenty of acquaintances but I reckon them as mere blanks.

AUGUSTA. And you do not make friends easily.

BYRON [*haughtily*] I hate strangers.

AUGUSTA. Until two years ago you and I were not more. We had scarcely seen each other.

BYRON. I was the loneliest soul living.

AUGUSTA. We must change all that. When I am married to George Leigh. . . .

BYRON. Ah, when! Remember—yours is not all smooth sailing either. Can't you drive this cousin of ours out of your pretty little head?

AUGUSTA. Now you are laughing at me.

BYRON. Or if you are too far gone for that why not run off with him to Scotland and get married out of hand?

AUGUSTA. That would mean trouble.

BYRON. For which you have no fondness, have you?

AUGUSTA. I had rather always let things take care of themselves.

BYRON. And yet you have gone to no end of trouble to

persuade my meek mamma to allow me to remain here past the holidays. . . .

AUGUSTA. That is not because I approve of your reason.

BYRON. My reason, you will admit, wears an angel's face.

AUGUSTA. She is two years older than you.

BYRON. That's no ill match.

AUGUSTA. She is not even disengaged.

BYRON. Do you think I shall ever let that fox-hunting squire have her?

AUGUSTA. I could not say why, but—Byron, I do not trust Mary Chaworth.

BYRON. Among women, only fools trust each other. Here is something to convince you. Mary has given me a ring.

AUGUSTA. Be careful John Musters does not hear of it.

BYRON [*proudly—touched on the raw*] You think I am afraid of him?

AUGUSTA. I think you are afraid of nothing on this earth. . . . I am older than you, that is all. I can't help being afraid for you.

BYRON. Goose! Do you know what love is?

[AUGUSTA *begins to speak. He silences her imperatively.*]

BYRON. *I* do! Mary Chaworth has shown me. The Dream . . . the undying Dream! [*He is almost transfigured.*] One time . . . one time alone . . . I shall remember on my deathbed. At Matlock—with her party. We crossed a stream flowing through a cavern. So close

under the rock the boat had to be pushed along by a ferryman stooping wading at the stern. Room for only two in the boat. Mary and I. [*He becomes intensely agitated.*] We had to lie down . . . her hair touched my face. . . .

AUGUSTA [*gently*] She has quite pretty hair.

BYRON. She walks in beauty.

AUGUSTA. Am I to wait and see her now?

BYRON. You are to go back to the Abbey and restore the Dowager to her nearest approach to sanity. While I touch heaven—for an hour.

AUGUSTA. Is it almost time for your . . .

BYRON. Lady of the Dream? It is almost time. We meet here every afternoon.

[AUGUSTA *puts her hand on his head and ruffles his hair softly . . . with sisterly apprehension.*]

BYRON [*jerking his head aside but smiling*] Do you want her to see me with the frontlet of an Assyrian bull?

AUGUSTA. She might as well. For she will never see you as you are. [*Turns to go.*]

BYRON. God bless you, Augusta.

[*Someone is heard coming singing through the wood. A Welsh air called "Mary-Anne."* BYRON *at once becomes intensely excited.*]

BYRON. Too late. She's here. I can't have you appearing to avoid her. Stay . . . be your most gracious . . .

AUGUSTA. Anything you wish. . . .

[MARY CHAWORTH *appears beyond the fence and comes toward the gate with a light step. Dark eyes . . . ring-*

leted dark hair. Coquettish demeanor. Stops apparently amazed at the encounter.]

MARY. Byron . . . how surprising! I fancied I had the wood to myself.

BYRON [*going quickly forward*] My sister and I . . . we were just speaking of you. [*Beckons* AUGUSTA *to come forward.*]

MARY. Kindly, I hope. [*Rather coyly.*]

AUGUSTA. How could it be otherwise?

MARY [*to* AUGUSTA *with charming friendliness*] You are here for long?

AUGUSTA. For only a day or so.

BYRON. She has amazed me by telling me she is tired of London.

MARY [*languidly*] It does weary one after a time. So many balls . . . such dreadful late hours. So many calls upon one's time.

BYRON. I thought the gaieties of the Metropolis were particularly pleasing to young ladies.

AUGUSTA. As in many good things—they have their objections.

MARY. After a time. [*Conversation lags.*]

BYRON [*desperately*] For myself, I detest London. The smoke and the noise I find particularly unpleasant. Here, at least is solitude.

MARY [*coquettishly*] He is an absolute hermit.

AUGUSTA. He is lucky to have the company of a delightful friend so near his own age. [*At a warning glance from* BYRON *she prepares to depart.*] I promised

your mother, Byron, to sit with her this afternoon. . . .

BYRON. She mentioned it to me with considerable anticipation.

MARY. Pity to leave this lovely spot. Are not the bluebells beautiful?

BYRON. No one has Mary's eyes to see them.

AUGUSTA [*to* MARY] I hope I may again . . .

MARY. I shall so look forward . . . [*With a wave of the hand to* BYRON, AUGUSTA *goes away.*] Ought you not to go with her?

BYRON. There are no lions on that path. [*Smiles.*]

MARY [*waiting till* AUGUSTA *is well out of hearing*] I can stay for a moment only.

BYRON [*taking her hand and pressing it to his lips*] Then for that moment sit here and let me lie at your feet. It is always the same. When you go you throw me out again. Alone on a wide, wide sea.

[MARY *seats herself at the foot of the tree and* BYRON *throws himself down . . . lies resting on his elbow with his head on his hand gazing up into her face.*]

BYRON. Ten thousand years since yesterday.

MARY. Has it been so long?

BYRON. A waste of centuries.

MARY. And yet you have your sister with you.

BYRON. Augusta understands me—true enough. I rely upon her affection . . . but my heart is at rest only with you. It beats only to adore you. [*She makes as if to withdraw her hand in a gesture of shyness.*] Never fear . . . before a soul as pure as yours . . . I know

how to smother my rising fires.

MARY. If I remember—you did not smother your fires very well at Matlock.

BYRON. The boat . . . ah, God . . . don't reproach me with that. Fiends might pity what I felt. So near . . . and so divided.

MARY [*demurely*] I was thinking of the Assembly Rooms. Of the ball that night.

BYRON [*sits up and puts his hands to his eyes as if to shut out a memory*] I cannot bear it—when you waltz.

MARY. But Byron—the waltz is new—it's fashionable—and besides I could not live without dancing.

BYRON. When it can never be with me . . . ? [*The reproach is wrenched from him.*]

MARY. Would you have me give it up for that reason? . . . If you have nothing but lectures and scoldings for me I may as well leave you now. [*Pouts.*]

BYRON [*in instant distress*] Ah, Mary, forgive me. . . .

MARY. If you loved me as you pretend to do . . . you would want me happy. And amused.

BYRON. Pretend! The word is a knife.

MARY. Then no more of these jealous rages.

BYRON. You can quiet my darkest fury with the tip of your finger. [*He presses both her hands madly to his lips.*]

MARY [*smiling with satisfaction to herself above his bent head*] And you will ride beside John Musters and me without scowling like a Turk?

BYRON. I cannot help my own inner tortures—but I will

ride smiling.

MARY. I hope you are not careless with my ring? [*Looks at him closely.*] I should not like it to be seen.

BYRON. By Musters perhaps? [*He turns blackly jealous again.*]

MARY. You are impossible today. [*Appears about to rise.*]

BYRON. For God's sake, don't go. I will be milder than a lamb in a meadow. You know what is consuming me. I see you so little—and out of sight of you I am desolate. In crowds even, I am single as a bird without a mate. There's no other smile calls me . . . no other face charms me. . . .

MARY [*softly*] Am I truly irresistible?

BYRON [*simply*] I cannot love but one.

MARY. How sweetly you flatter.

BYRON. Man doesn't flatter on his knees. [*Kneels before her—tries to put his arms about her. She holds him off.*] My first prayer on waking is a blessing to you. I swear to you, Mary, by my hope of heaven, wherever life may take me . . . however high . . . however low . . . I shall never love another woman.

MARY [*shaking her ringlets*] So you say.

BYRON. Upon my very soul. [*With passionate sincerity.*]

MARY. How cool it is growing.

BYRON [*instantly*] You are not chilled.

MARY. I must be going back. I shall be missed.

BYRON. By no one on earth as by me. [*He rises. Helps her to her feet.*] Tomorrow—here at the oak again?

MARY. I may ride tomorrow afternoon.

BYRON. Then let me ride with you.

MARY. How low the sun is. It must be very late.

BYRON. Answer me . . . don't keep me in Purgatory. I may ride with you tomorrow?

MARY. There will be a party.

BYRON. So I ride near you it doesn't matter. I have before this ridden with shadows.

MARY. Well—I will see. Perhaps . . .

BYRON. You want me with you—don't you? [*Pleadingly.*]

MARY. Of course. [*She smiles on him with coquettish tenderness.*]

BYRON. Always? . . . bright Morning-Star of Annesley.

MARY. Always . . . of course.

BYRON. You say it so sweetly. I think if my heart cannot be still it will break.

[MARY *has been looking off across the gate into the woods beyond.*]

MARY [*suddenly*] You must go now.

BYRON. One moment more. . . .

MARY. We have lingered already past the usual time.

BYRON. With you there is no time.

MARY. Will you go—if I ask it? [*Coaxingly.*]

BYRON. You are expecting Musters. [*Once more tormented.*]

MARY. Here? . . . at our tree? Are you mad?

BYRON. Our tree! Not even your words have made music like that until now. [*Is overwhelmed by emotion.*] Mary . . . kiss me once . . . once let me touch your lips. [*She tries to hold him off but without too much determination. Her vanity is fed by his adolescent passion.*] Your touch . . . it's beyond telling how it shakes me . . . my blood ebbs and flows. . . .

MARY [*deliciously frightened*] Byron . . . you are not yourself. . . . [*Resistance lessening still more.*]

BYRON. I no longer live within myself . . . you are my life . . . I have no breath, no being but in you. [*Closes his arms about her.*]

MARY. Your voice even—sounds strange. . . .

BYRON. You are my voice . . . you are my sight . . . you are the one beloved face on earth . . . give me your lips!

MARY [*reckless in experiment*] If I do . . . will you let me go?

BYRON. Out of my arms, yes, out of my soul . . . never!

[*She yields. He kisses her. Passionately—tenderly—reverently. She draws herself free.*]

MARY [*still completely in control of herself*] Now . . . you have promised. And I must run home. Not an instant longer.

BYRON. Now . . . it is like tearing flesh to leave you.

[*He hides his face for a moment in the palms of her hands then turns and goes slowly up the way* AUGUSTA *had gone . . . into the copse of young trees. Left alone*

MARY *straightens her hair and her dress, fans her flushed face with her handkerchief.* BYRON *is barely out of sight before an elderly* MAID *appears walking beside the fence, stops at the gate, leans upon it and regards* MARY *with affectionate anxiety. The indulged concern of an old servant.*]

MAID. Well—he's come. . . . I told him you were still at your dressing . . . as you said I was to say. But that won't fool him forever.

MARY. Don't be grumpy, Nanny . . . I'll be there before he's had time to think.

MAID. Don't count too much on men's not thinking. Sometimes they surprise you. Best have a peek in your mirror before you go into the drawing-room, too. You look a bit tumbled. Where's my young Lord?

MARY. Gone back to his mother and his sister. . . . [*With an airily contemptuous little grimace.*]

MAID. And suppose Squire Musters gets wind of all this philandering. All the carrying back and forth of letters what I've been doing.

MARY. If he does—I'll know who to blame for it. Now be a good Nanny and stop scolding. . . . I haven't time to listen to you. [*Starts to go.*]

MAID [*blows her nose loudly*] Having took care of you from a child . . . it's only natural I should worry . . . when I see you taking chances . . . getting ready to burn your pretty fingers maybe . . . [*Blows her nose loudly again. While she is speaking* BYRON *has returned to the edge of the copse. He stops there surprised. Having obviously expected to find the place deserted. He*

stands silent . . . uncertain.]

MAID. All this fiddle-faddle . . . in love and out. . . .

MARY [*clear and distinct in protest*] What? . . . I love that lame boy! [*Goes off into a peal of laughter. She and the* MAID *go away together. When they have gone* BYRON *comes slowly down the path. His face is drawn with the unbearable agony of the wound which has just been dealt him. He stands one moment looking dazedly about him . . . at the oak . . . at the gate . . . then wheels and begins to run—stumblingly—he crashes through the copse like a stricken animal. As the sound of his flight dies away the curtain falls.*]

ACT ONE

ACT ONE

Scene I

A room in Reddish's Hotel, London.
Time: *July 1811.*
The curtain rises on BYRON'S *sitting room, before noon of a rather muggy morning. Trunks and boxes standing about. Over back of chair elaborate uniform . . . on seat of chair plumed cocked hat . . . sword alongside. Heap of silken flowered shawls on another seat. The stage is empty for a moment then* FLETCHER *appears with a small tray . . . coffee cup, and so on. He was originally a farmer on* BYRON'S *estate and is now* BYRON'S *personal servant.* FLETCHER *crosses room and goes out of door at left.* BYRON'S *bedroom from which* FLETCHER *comes is upper right. Door at right leads to corridor. There is an alcoved window-seat at upper left. A large sofa downstage right. Small trunk open with chair beside it downstage left. Articles on chair apparently taken from trunk. Presently* FLETCHER *returns. Begins to straighten up. Folds shawls, etc. After a moment or so there is a knock at the door. Enter* DALLAS . . . *fifty-seven, neatly and conservatively dressed. He carries a package of manuscript.*

DALLAS. Good morning, Fletcher.

FLETCHER. Good morning, sir.

DALLAS. I'm a bit early, I expect.

FLETCHER. His Lordship has not quite finished dressing, Mr. Dallas. I will tell him you are here.

DALLAS [*gesturing negation*] Not for the world. I shall be happy to wait. [*Lays script on table.*] I see you're still at the business of unpacking.

FLETCHER. His Lordship doesn't travel light, sir.

DALLAS. You seem to have got home in good shape.

FLETCHER. Yes and no. There was a greyhound that died on the passage.

DALLAS. A greyhound—upon my word!

FLETCHER. Four live tortoises came through nicely, however.

DALLAS. Well . . . that's something to be thankful for.

FLETCHER. Then there were four Athenian skulls got misplaced somewhere aboard the frigate, but they turned up the day before we landed. [*Continues setting things tidy.*]

DALLAS. Brought back two Greek servants, I understand.

FLETCHER. Yes, sir. One Athenian and one that speaks nothing but Romaic and Italian.

DALLAS. I expect you've become quite a linguist, Fletcher. Two years away from England.

FLETCHER [*modestly*] If I may say so, I don't do so badly.

[DALLAS *strolls over and regards uniform on chair.*]

FLETCHER. His Lordship wore that in Constantinople, sir. It was much admired.

DALLAS. I have no doubt.

FLETCHER [*proudly*] His Lordship was admitted to an audience there of Sultan Mahmoud. [*Knock at the door.*] Excuse me, sir . . . [*Admits* HOBHOUSE, *about* BYRON'S *age, dignified but pleasant.*]

HOBHOUSE. Well, Fletcher—is Lord Byron about?

FLETCHER. He will be out at any moment, sir.

HOBHOUSE [*comes into room, lays hat on table, sees* DALLAS *looking at uniform*] Good morning, Mr. Dallas. I see you're impressed by Byron's uniform.

DALLAS [*turns*] Good morning, Mr. Hobhouse. Fletcher was just telling me. . . .

HOBHOUSE. About the audience with the Sultan? [*Chuckles.*] That was a remarkable affair. Byron and I entered the throne room escorted by a guard of white eunuchs.

DALLAS [*laughs politely but without enthusiasm*] You yourself returned to England last year, I believe.

HOBHOUSE. Just a year ago, leaving Byron on his way back to Greece. I hope I don't intrude upon an appointment.

DALLAS. Not at all, Mr. Hobhouse. I am here merely to return a manuscript.

HOBHOUSE. Hints from Horace? . . . He was at it when I left him. You find it good?

DALLAS [*evasively*] Don't forget—before he left here . . . his English Bards and Scotch Reviewers . . . the critics will expect much.

HOBHOUSE. They will find an older Byron. More than time can well account for.

DALLAS. He wrote last year that he had done with authorship. I was deeply anxious.

HOBHOUSE. Authorship will never have done with him.

BYRON. [*Slender, pale, handsome, appears suddenly in doorway of bedroom.*] My dear Hobhouse. [*Warmly.*] Good morning, Mr. Dallas. I wager Hobby has already treated you to a fine dish of our Levantine wanderings. Has he told you how I almost died for love of three Greek girls at Athens . . . sisters . . . Teresa, Mariana, Katinka?

HOBHOUSE. Teresa I thought was your especial folly.

BYRON. My maid of Athens . . . Zoe mou, sas agapo . . . [*Romantic pause, then transition to cynical amusement.*] But the old woman expected me to marry the girl! [*Sudden flare-up of almost boyish eagerness follows.*] Has he told you that I swam the Hellespont?

DALLAS. You yourself mentioned it to me in a letter.

HOBHOUSE. Mentioned it only? You got off well. [*His manner is affectionately rallying.*] Are you sure Mr. Dallas, that he has not mentioned it in at least five letters?

BYRON. Damn you, Hobhouse, for malice, envy and all other undesirable qualities. [*He is entirely good-natured to* DALLAS.] I swam it in an hour and ten minutes. From Sestos to Abydos. And unlike Leander with no Hero waiting for me on t'other side. Will you sit here, Mr. Dallas? [*Indicates sofa . . . sits beside* DALLAS. HOBHOUSE *draws up chair.*] Forgive my domestic confusion. Fletcher has not yet succeeded in reducing chaos.

[FLETCHER *still at his work presently goes out into bedroom.*]

HOBHOUSE. I seem to note a certain smug satisfaction in Fletcher's labors. Glad to be back on solid English soil, isn't he?

DALLAS. [*To* BYRON.] I hope his master is equally pleased.

BYRON. [*Sharp change of mood to grim bitterness.*] I left England without regret. I return without pleasure. I am coming *home* without a hope—almost without a desire.

DALLAS. Surely you exaggerate.

BYRON. No need to. The facts are dark enough. All my affairs are going on as badly as possible.

DALLAS. Your work . . .

BYRON [*contemptuously*] Nothing is so fretful, so despicable, as a scribbler.

HOBHOUSE. You wrote me you had done four thousand lines of one kind or another since I left you.

BYRON [*grinning dryly*] The dog returns to his vomit. I shall be at war with publishers till I find some better amusement. What do you make of the Hints from Horace, Mr. Dallas?

[DALLAS *hesitates.*]

HOBHOUSE. I'll leave you to your present battle, Byron. I came in only to suggest that we dine together this evening. [*Rises.*]

BYRON [*rising also*] By then I shall be in a better

humor I promise you. [*Puts his hand on* HOBHOUSE'S *shoulder.*]

HOBHOUSE. Shall we say six then? And good day to you, Mr. Dallas.

DALLAS. Good day, Mr. Hobhouse.

BYRON. Six it is. [*Walks with* HOBHOUSE *to the door—shakes hands there affectionately . . . closes door and returns to* DALLAS.] And now, sir . . .

DALLAS. [*Has risen and is standing at table fingering manuscript. His attitude is uneasy and as with* HOBHOUSE *slightly evasive.*] I have read this through several times. . . .

BYRON [*impatient*] That's a damned unfortunate beginning. Once should have been enough.

DALLAS [*cautiously*] I admit to a certain surprise . . . you had spoken so eagerly of your travels. . . . I had rather expected . . .

BYRON. Expected what, man? Satire is my forte. It's a satire you have there.

DALLAS. I had looked—if you will not resent the suggestion—for something more in the way of adventure. [*Hurriedly.*] Not that the verse is bad.

BYRON. By which you mean to imply it isn't good.

DALLAS. Anything of yours . . .

BYRON. Spare me apologies. You are disappointed.

DALLAS. That is too harsh a word. But after two years under strange skies . . . surely some more uncommon inspiration . . .

BYRON. You find my inspiration grown commonplace,

do you?

DALLAS [*unhappily*] My dear Lord Byron—I have the highest admiration for your genius . . . my affection for you is undiminished. . . .

BYRON. But you find this poor stuff. Come to the point.

DALLAS [*desperately*] Is there nothing else?

BYRON. Nothing worth mentioning. [*Bitterly impatient.*] A lyric or so.

DALLAS [*eagerly*] Enough perhaps for a collection?

BYRON. Not enough to put in a blind beggar's hat.

DALLAS. Nothing—however incomplete . . . surely in all this time . . .

BYRON [*reluctantly and impatiently*] Oh, some stanzas in the Spenserian measure. . . . Nothing worth your trouble.

DALLAS [*more eagerly yet*] Let me be the judge.

BYRON [*shrugging—hurt, angry and indifferent*] Have the whole mess if you like. . . . [*He goes to the small trunk and stooping searches about in it. Speaks over his shoulder to* DALLAS.] A good critic read them and found little to commend. My own opinion is the same. [*Rises with number of papers in his hands, returns to* DALLAS *and gives them to him.*]

DALLAS [*inspecting the papers closely*] You call this . . . ?

BYRON. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. [*Pause while* DALLAS *pores over first page.*] You will only waste your time. [*Sincerely annoyed. Knock at door.* FLETCHER *comes through room from bedroom, opens door to* AU-

GUSTA *in street clothing.* BYRON *turns at once.*] Dear Augusta. . . . [*Warmly.*]

[FLETCHER *goes back into bedroom.*]

AUGUSTA. I am sorry. . . . I might have known you would be occupied.

BYRON. Come in . . . come in . . . Mr. Dallas, you know my sister, Mrs. Leigh?

DALLAS. I have that pleasure. [*He bows over* AUGUSTA'S *hand.*] You find your brother looking well after his long absence?

BYRON [*good-humouredly*] I am in tolerable leanness.

AUGUSTA. His absence was far too long. [*Pats* BYRON'S *sleeve affectionately.*] You were discussing the Horace? I don't want to interrupt.

BYRON. We have only just laid the Horace to rest—with suitable obsequies. Mr. Dallas is now inviting a second bereavement.

DALLAS. If I might just glance over a page or so at once . . . shall I disturb you if I sit in the window?

BYRON. Not in the least. [DALLAS *sits in the window alcove with manuscript.* BYRON *and* AUGUSTA *sit together on sofa.*]

BYRON. Well—what are all those unutterable things you were about to disclose to me when I left you yesterday afternoon?

AUGUSTA. You have not lost your old habit of laughing at me. It was domestic gossip, mostly . . . if that bores you. . . .

BYRON. It amuses me that you have been increasing the

number of His Majesty's subjects. In these times of war and tribulation I call that highly patriotic.

AUGUSTA. Oh, Byron, I do so want to show them to you. They are just the sort of children you would delight in.

BYRON [*mockingly*] I abominate the sight of children. I have always had the greatest respect for Herod.

AUGUSTA. I can't tell you the happiness it would give Colonel Leigh and me if you would come to us for a visit. *Pray* do. I have set my heart on it.

BYRON. I look forward to the pleasure. [*Stops—sits for a moment looking at her keenly.*] You hinted yesterday at pecuniary losses.

AUGUSTA. Nothing that cannot be mended.

BYRON. In any event and in all situations, remember . . . you have a brother in me and a home in Newstead Abbey. You must not think that I am indifferent. . . . the manner in which I was brought up . . .

AUGUSTA. Dearest Byron—I have not forgotten. Enough to have broken a meeker spirit.

BYRON [*brooding pause*] By the by . . . [*recklessly gay*] I am about to go in for politics and decorum. I shall take my seat in the House of Lords. Also I shall marry if I can find anyone inclined to barter money for rank. [AUGUSTA *laughs.*] That amuses you, does it? When I discover someone rich enough to suit me and foolish enough to have me—I will give her leave to make me miserable if she can.

AUGUSTA. Don't be angry if I say it is not everyone that *would* suit you.

BYRON. Newstead Abbey will make a delightful matri-

monial mansion. Plenty of room for a difference of opinion. My wife in one wing, I in the other.

AUGUSTA. I hope you are serious in this. I am sure it would be a fortunate decision.

BYRON. I have never heard of but one man truly fortunate and he buried two wives and gained three lawsuits before he was thirty.

AUGUSTA [*with affectionate anxiety*] You speak as if you were past loving. At twenty-three?

BYRON [*brusquely*] I had enough of love before twenty. [*Rises abruptly.*] Well, Mr. Dallas . . . have you fallen asleep over Childe Harold? Don't be afraid to speak. It is anything but poetry.

[DALLAS *in a sort of daze, rises and comes down to the table in the centre of the room. As he does so* AUGUSTA *hurriedly prepares to depart.*]

AUGUSTA. I promised the children to return to them before luncheon, Byron.

BYRON. She is chicken-hearted, Dallas, and would escape before the slaughter.

DALLAS. I beg of you, Mrs. Leigh . . .

BYRON. Wise Augusta! Go back to your brats and tell them to take to hemlock before ink. The suffering is shorter. [*He waves* AUGUSTA *away. She goes with a flurried bow and gesture of helplessness toward* DALLAS. *To* DALLAS.] You see I was right. The Horace is the thing.

DALLAS [*deeply excited*] I have been so fascinated with Childe Harold that I have not been able to lay it down.

BYRON. Rubbish! It was written merely for my own relief.

DALLAS. You have written one of the most delightful poems I have ever read. . . .

BYRON. Even if it were what you say . . . it would bring all my old enemies down on me in no time.

DALLAS. I will answer for this poem silencing your enemies.

BYRON. I can believe no such thing.

DALLAS. I am so convinced of its merit that I shall certainly get it published at once.

BYRON. It is pestilent long. And I tell you the Horace must not wait.

DALLAS. After Childe Harold your publisher will be crying for more.

BYRON. Very well—I make you a gift of the copyright. Publish anonymously. I want nothing of it.

DALLAS. You are too generous, Lord Byron. [*Implor-ingly.*] But you will not deny the book your name. It is a masterpiece. I swear it to you . . . [*Becomes incoherent.*]

BYRON [*nervous and annoyed*] Take it—take it and be damned!

DALLAS. I shall have news for you shortly. [*Shakes hands.*]

BYRON. You will find you deceive yourself. [DALLAS *goes.*] Fletcher! [FLETCHER *appears in doorway of bedroom.*] What time is it?

FLETCHER. It is almost noon, your lordship.

BYRON. I do nothing and even that nothing fatigues me. What in the name of all Gadarene swine have you done with the pens?

CURTAIN

ACT ONE

Scene II

Anteroom to the House of Lords.
Time: *February 1812.*
The curtain rises on a room empty except for one or two chairs standing against the wall. A large door, upper centre, narrower doors at right and left. Presently doorman *in uniform opens door from House and enters. As he does so the voice of* byron *comes clearly through. The voice is heard only when the door is open.*

voice of byron [*loud, dramatic and forensic*] We must not allow mankind to be sacrificed to improvement in mechanism. Had proper meetings been held in the earlier stages of these riots . . . [doorman *closes door and voice is no longer heard.* first *and* second lords *enter together from left just as door is closing.*]

first lord [*to* doorman] Who is speaking?

doorman. Lord Byron, sir. . . . On the Framework Bill. [*Opens door for the two to go in.*]

voice of byron. I do think that means might have been devised to restore these workmen to their avocations and tranquillity to the country. In what state of apathy have we been plunged for so long that now for the first time the House has been officially apprised of these disturbances?

[second lord *gestures* doorman *with some irritation*

to close the door. DOORMAN *closes door and voice is no longer heard. The two Lords walk a little aside.*]

FIRST LORD [*sardonically tolerant*] Lord Byron being no doubt divinely appointed to inform England of what is going on within her borders.

SECOND LORD [*bitterly resentful*] Are employers to stand idly by while weavers destroy the looms? Submit tamely to the destruction of their property? My gorge rises at the thought.

FIRST LORD. I understand that by the adoption of one species of frame in particular one man does the work of many and others are thrown out of employment.

SECOND LORD. So the others destroy the frames and Lord Byron encourages them. Is this patriotism? Is this loyalty to the State?

FIRST LORD. My dear fellow—are you heckling Lord Byron or me? I hold no brief for the political poet nor yet for the poetical politician.

SECOND LORD. The man's dangerous, I tell you. In days like these he who is not for the Government is against England.

FIRST LORD. Give him time say I and he will cut his own throat. Shall we go in and hear more of his especial brand of sedition? [DOORMAN *opens door for them.*]

VOICE OF BYRON. You call these men a mob . . . [FIRST *and* SECOND LORDS *are taken aback, stop and listen.*] . . . desperate, dangerous, ignorant. . . . You seem to think that the only way to quiet a mob is to lop off a few of its heads.

SECOND LORD. Good God! That's revolution speaking!

VOICE OF BYRON. It is the mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses . . . that man your navy and recruit your army . . .

SECOND LORD. As an old Army man that shakes me to the teeth.

VOICE OF BYRON . . . that have enabled you to defy all the world and that can also defy *you* when neglect and calamity have driven them to despair.

FIRST LORD. He will cut his own throat—no doubt of it.

VOICE OF BYRON. You call the people a mob but do not forget that a mob too often speaks the sentiments of the people!

[*Commotion in House.*]

SECOND LORD. This is unbearable.

FIRST LORD. Let us be in at the death.

[*They go in and* DOORMAN *reluctantly closes door.* DOORMAN *strains to hear through closed door, expression of satisfaction on his face. Presently enter* THIRD LORD *from left.*]

DOORMAN [*without waiting to be asked*] Lord Byron is speaking at present, my Lord, on the Framework Bill.

THIRD LORD. His first speech, isn't it?

DOORMAN. Yes, my lord.

[*Door opens and* FOURTH LORD *comes out from House.*]

VOICE OF BYRON. But doubtless our friends here have too many foreign claims to admit of prospect of domestic relief.

FOURTH LORD [*to* THIRD LORD] Take my advice and

don't go in. I am not queasy by nature but I've had my stomach turned.

THIRD LORD. Something close to radicalism, eh?

FOURTH LORD [*to* DOORMAN] Leave it ajar a moment.

[DOORMAN *opens door slightly.*]

VOICE OF BYRON. I have traversed the seat of war in the Peninsula . . . I have been in some of the most oppressed provinces of Turkey . . . but never under the most despotic of infidel governments did I behold such squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of a Christian country. [*Cries from House.* No! No!]

[DOORMAN *closes door.*]

THIRD LORD. He should have stayed in the Levant.

FOURTH LORD. If he goes on as he has begun he will find cause to return there.

THIRD LORD. There's talk to the effect that he has another book on the press.

FOURTH LORD. And it is to an irresponsible, unscrupulous scribbler like him that England allows a hand in her destinies. I tell you with Europe in its present state, any match might serve to set off gunpowder. We dare not permit treason . . .

THIRD LORD. Oh, not quite that should you say?

FOURTH LORD. This shaves it pretty close.

[*Door opens and* SECOND LORD *returns.*]

VOICE OF BYRON. And what are your remedies?

THIRD LORD. The Bill asks the death penalty, doesn't it? For destruction of frames?

FOURTH LORD. And rightly so. [*Grimly.*] Close the door— [DOORMAN *closes door—he has been listening with avidity and does so reluctantly.*] We have had enough.

SECOND LORD. You do well to stay out. I have never before heard England publicly defamed by one of her own peers. He is stating to the world at large that the realm is in decay.

THIRD LORD. Come, come . . . one moment . . . England can't be wiped out single-handed. Not even by the Sixth Lord Byron. Let's hear him further.

FOURTH LORD. Complaisance such as yours is very nearly as dangerous as corruption such as his. [*They glare at each other.* DOORMAN *opens door for them to hear.*]

VOICE OF BYRON. Suppose the bill is passed . . . suppose one of these men as I have seen them—meagre with famine, sullen with despair, careless of a life which your Lordships are about to value at something less than the price of a stocking-frame . . . suppose this man—and there are ten thousand such from whom you may select your victims—

FOURTH LORD. Is that treasonable or is it not?

THIRD LORD. Give him his chance. Hear him out.

VOICE OF BYRON. Suppose this man dragged into court, to be tried for this new offence, by this new law; still there are two things wanting to convict and condemn him; and these are in my opinion—twelve butchers for a jury and a Jeffreys for a judge!

[*Applause from House.*]

FOURTH LORD [*almost incoherent*] Insupportable!

[DOORMAN *closes door.*]

THIRD LORD. Upon my word he has courage—of a sort.

SECOND LORD. Courage—to blacken us before the world!

[*Re-enter* FIRST LORD.]

FIRST LORD. I have just heard Lord Holland say "he will beat us all if he perseveres." Grenville is declaring he is very like Burke.

[*Exit* FIRST LORD.]

FOURTH LORD. He will be poison in England's veins.

THIRD LORD. At least you must respect the fellow's sincerity.

[*Enter* BYRON, *walking as always with a slight limp . . . looks pale and rather exhausted. When he realizes the sudden silence—obviously awkward—which falls upon his entrance he pauses, looks the three Lords over thoughtfully and breaks into a charming smile.*]

BYRON. Good day, gentlemen . . . I am a little apprehensive that I shall be thought half a frame-breaker, myself.

CURTAIN

ACT ONE

Scene III

Drawing-room at Melbourne House.
Time: *May 1812.*
When the curtain rises dancing is going on. LADY MELBOURNE, *distinguished and still beautiful woman of sixty odd, is standing upstage, left, talking to* WILLIAM LAMB *and* TOM MOORE. *At lower right,* HOBHOUSE *and* LADY OXFORD . . . *a somewhat disillusioned and daring beauty of forty are seated on a sofa talking.*

LADY OXFORD. Childe Harold is late tonight.

HOBHOUSE. Does he really go by that name—or are you jesting?

LADY OXFORD. Do you suppose that when he put himself on paper for the world to see he expected to go by any other?

HOBHOUSE. He has less thought of the world than you imagine. He writes as a wolf howls. Under cosmic compulsion.

LADY OXFORD. You are close friends . . . are you not?

HOBHOUSE. I hope so.

LADY OXFORD [*blandly*] Lady Caroline Lamb is late as well.

HOBHOUSE. Is she? I hadn't observed.

LADY OXFORD. Come, come, Mr. Hobhouse. Even friend-

ship can't be so blind as all that. It's the talk of the drawing-rooms. They have been lovers almost from the day his poem fell into her hands.

HOBHOUSE. The lady has a husband, I believe.

LADY OXFORD [*laughs*] The most complaisant in London. Too bored to lift an eyelid to watch her. And she the wildest creature living. [*Musing.*] She has strange influence though. I have known a word from her to make or break a man before this.

HOBHOUSE [*stiffly*] Byron is beyond her breaking.

LADY OXFORD. What a loyal creature you are!

HOBHOUSE. I know him better than most.

LADY OXFORD. Shall I admit—I wish that *I* did? [*Is serious only for a moment—then glances over her shoulder and turns back with a laugh.*] They have arrived—together, as usual. [*Rises . . .* HOBHOUSE *rises also, gives her his arm and they move toward the back of the room.*]

[*There is a perceptible crowding about* BYRON *who has entered with* CAROLINE *on his arm. Waltz stops. Music stops.* BYRON *and* CAROLINE *go toward* LADY MELBOURNE *who advances to meet them.* WILLIAM LAMB *turns quietly away.* MOORE *accompanies* LADY MELBOURNE. MOORE *kisses* CAROLINE'S *hand.* CAROLINE *is a frail, pretty, vivacious woman of about twenty-eight.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. You are late, Byron. Are you becoming unmindful of me?

BYRON. Dear Lady Melbourne—nothing ever makes me unmindful of you.

CAROLINE [*with proprietary air*] He has been all day

mulling over certain revisions . . . for his publisher. You must forgive him, aunt.

BYRON. I will be forgiven on none but my own request.

LADY MELBOURNE. No other would avail you.

CAROLINE. Am I not to be allowed even to plead for him?

MOORE. Everybody quarrels with everybody else over Byron. 'Tis enough to send an honest man to the wars.

LADY MELBOURNE [*to* CAROLINE] You are dancing tonight, Caroline?

CAROLINE [*shakes her head*] Not tonight . . . nor tomorrow.

MOORE [*as music begins again*] You can resist those fiddles?

CAROLINE. I can resist—when I choose. [*Smiles at* MOORE.]

LADY MELBOURNE. Give me your arm, Mr. Moore. At my age thank heaven there is no longer any choice in resistance.

[MOORE *and* LADY MELBOURNE *go off.* BYRON *and* CAROLINE *stand downstage right. The waltz begins and dancers reappear at back of room.*]

BYRON. Swear that you will never waltz. I could not endure it.

CAROLINE. I have already sworn.

BYRON. Swear again.

CAROLINE. On my knees—if you like.

BYRON [*slightly curious and amused*] On your knees —actually?

CAROLINE. If you ask it.

BYRON. You are the most absurd, perplexing, dangerous, fascinating little pagan . . . you should have lived two thousand years ago.

CAROLINE. Two thousand years between us . . . never! Shall I tell you what I wrote in my diary the night I first saw you?

BYRON. You like whatever is new at the moment.

CAROLINE. I wrote . . . that beautiful pale face will be my fate.

BYRON. What madness . . .

CAROLINE. Mad and bad and dangerous to know . . . that is what I wrote of you.

BYRON. God knows—you may have been right.

CAROLINE. I was wrong. . . . You love me as never woman was loved before. . . .

BYRON. Caro . . . this is no time . . .

CAROLINE. As for me I love you better than life itself . . . break my heart and I will still love you.

BYRON [*tenderly*] What a little volcano your heart is! It pours lava through your veins.

CAROLINE. You wish it colder?

BYRON. Not colder. All that you so often say, I feel—but there is such a thing as prudence.

CAROLINE. You torture me with prudence!

BYRON. That same may be tiresome enough but we *must* maintain it . . . or [*flippantly*] what shall we do to be saved?

CAROLINE. My aunt is coming back to you. I hate all these women who follow you about.

BYRON. If your aunt were a few years younger what a fool she could make of me . . .

CAROLINE [*furiously*] I will not have you say it.

BYRON. And what a friend I should thus lose in her.

CAROLINE. I will not stay to hear you two trading wits.

BYRON. Stay or go as you please. When do you ever do anything else?

CAROLINE [*weakens at his coldness*] I am full of faults, I know . . . [*humbly*] but there is not one that shan't be instantly got rid of, if you think it worth your while to name it.

[LADY MELBOURNE *has come downstage and seated herself upon the sofa. She is watching him and* CAROLINE.]

BYRON [*almost pleadingly*] Now Caro, enough of this nonsense . . .

CAROLINE. [*Quick change to fury.*] You will find it enough indeed. [*She turns and goes swiftly away between the dancers.* LADY MELBOURNE *gestures to* BYRON *to come. He walks across to the sofa—his limp slightly in evidence and sits down beside her.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. You are not wise, Byron.

BYRON. I am tired of being a fool but what would you have me do?

LADY MELBOURNE. If you will listen to me . . .

BYRON. I am as docile as a dromedary.

LADY MELBOURNE. She is making herself ridiculous . . . and you.

BYRON [*winces*] It is not a rôle I enjoy playing.

LADY MELBOURNE. Why play it now? She treats you as

a possession.

BYRON. I have begun to feel the tug of the chain.

LADY MELBOURNE. All London is watching you dance attendance upon her affectations.

BYRON [*his pride hurt*] It is more than that. We have raised a devil between us.

LADY MELBOURNE. Then for your sake—let it be laid. Break with her. . . .

BYRON. Easier said than done.

LADY MELBOURNE. Better now than later. I warn you, Byron . . . she is a perilous woman and a vengeful one. She cannot endure to be thwarted.

BYRON. I have already had some experience of that.

LADY MELBOURNE. Nothing to what you will have if you go on. . . . [*She leans forward—lays her hand on his arm.*] Have you thought—who stands behind her?

BYRON. Two great houses. [*Bow and mocking smile.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. . . . who will not tolerate a scandal in their midst. At least not a public one. Have you thought also that it is houses such as these—not King nor Parliament—that rule your England today? And mine.

BYRON. Do I hear treason?

LADY MELBOURNE. You hear cold fact. [BYRON *takes her hand and kisses it gently.*] I implore you . . . do not make enemies whom you may not be able to escape.

BYRON. You are her aunt. Am I to count you as in the enemy's camp?

LADY MELBOURNE. Not I. I like you, Byron, for all your

wild humours. It may be a little because of them— [*Recovers cooler tone.*] But do you think my son a fool not to know what is going on?

BYRON. Would it be courteous in me to pass on your son's folly?

LADY MELBOURNE. One thing more . . .

BYRON. Let the lash fall!

LADY MELBOURNE. I think you told me some time since of a silly grudge you bore the Prince Regent because he cancelled a levee at which you were to appear.

BYRON. I tell you a great many fooleries.

LADY MELBOURNE. I wish to heaven you had stopped at telling *me*.

BYRON [*with uncontrollable chuckle*] I see you have read your *Morning Chronicle*. [*Quotes.*] "Weep daughter of a royal line . . ."

LADY MELBOURNE. Byron, are you bent upon your own destruction?

BYRON. Anonymous, dear Lady Melbourne. Blithely and benignly anonymous. . . .

LADY MELBOURNE. It is not in your nature to remain so.

BYRON. Half the town supposes Tom Moore to be the author. [*Laughs.*]

LADY MELBOURNE [*significantly*] *The Courier* considers the verses will make the Princess Charlotte view her father as an object of suspicion and disgrace.

BYRON. 'Tis a wise child. Princess or not.

LADY MELBOURNE. Directly I had read the outrageous

thing I knew none but you could have written it.

BYRON [*mockingly*] I am completely in your power.

LADY MELBOURNE. At the rate you are proceeding it will take a stronger hand than mine. . . . [*Rises.*] I see a niece to whom I should like to present you.

BYRON [*following*] Has not one niece of yours done me damage enough already?

LADY MELBOURNE. Annabella is no kin to Caroline—except by blood.

BYRON. The slightest of all ties.

[LADY MELBOURNE *and* BYRON *cross to where a little off centre* ANNABELLA MILBANKE *is standing with a young man. As they approach the young man bows and slips away.* ANNABELLA *is a fair slight girl of twenty.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. Have you been waltzing, Annabella, my dear?

ANNABELLA. You have forgotten, aunt, that I don't care for it.

LADY MELBOURNE [*dryly*] Between those who adore it and those who abhor it one has difficulty in remembering . . . I have brought Lord Byron to meet you.

BYRON. I am honored.

ANNABELLA. The author of Childe Harold has honor enough to need none from me.

LADY MELBOURNE. Nicely done, child. I couldn't have turned that better myself.

BYRON. Nor would. I am still smarting from recent chastisement.

LADY MELBOURNE. Consider Annabella in the way of

consolation. [*Goes away smiling.*]

BYRON. As a consoler have you soft hands, Miss Milbanke?

ANNABELLA. I am afraid I am too recently up from the country for that.

BYRON. Ah, then no doubt this sort of thing pleases you. By way of change.

ANNABELLA. I find myself wasting a great deal of time.

BYRON. I thought that the natural state of woman. What do you do with your time when you are not wasting it?

ANNABELLA. I am fond of mathematics.

BYRON. Seriously?

ANNABELLA. Here, I have not much time for it . . . nor my Greek neither.

BYRON [*smiles*] Extremely refreshing . . . as the current phrase goes.

ANNABELLA. People use it too often do they not? Even the newspapers have got hold of it.

BYRON. You have a critical faculty. I am amazed that you should care for Childe Harold.

ANNABELLA. It is uneven perhaps in places—but who in England does not care for it? . . . Poetry interests me greatly. I myself have written verses.

BYRON. Perhaps you will allow me to see some of them.

ANNABELLA. You are very kind.

BYRON. Perhaps only curious. . . .

[AUGUSTA *approaches with large red-faced man in uniform.*]

AUGUSTA. Byron. . . . We have been looking for you in the supper room.

BYRON. The last place in the world, my dear Augusta, you might have expected to find me. Miss Milbanke, you know my sister?

[AUGUSTA *and* ANNABELLA *bow smilingly.*]

AUGUSTA. My husband, Colonel Leigh, Miss Milbanke. [ANNABELLA *bows smiling but in silence to* COLONEL LEIGH.] George . . . do take Miss Millbanke to have an ice. Byron and I will follow.

COLONEL [*to* ANNABELLA] I can recommend the ices. . . . And perhaps a glass of sherry. [*He and* ANNABELLA *go off. For a moment* BYRON *and* AUGUSTA *stand looking after them.*]

BYRON. You've no idea what a young-matronly expression you have assumed—in the last three minutes. Very becoming but transparent as isinglass. You are thinking—what an excellent wife she would make me.

AUGUSTA. Oh, Byron—what a contrast . . .

BYRON. To one who shall be nameless—if she will allow me to keep her so? [*Dryly.*]

AUGUSTA. This one, all high principle, natural refinement. . . . I have heard of her . . . we have mutual friends.

BYRON. I should like her more if she were less perfect. [*Change of tone to abrupt melancholy.*] She seems too good for a fallen spirit to know. [*Another change to lighter mood.*] She has the fairest skin imaginable. You said we would follow. . . . [*As he and* AUGUSTA *are turning away* LADY OXFORD *comes up to them.*]

AUGUSTA. Lady Oxford! I had heard you were ill.

LADY OXFORD. Only too long sleepless over Childe Harold. Tell me, Lord Byron, when are we to look for another over-night triumph?

BYRON. If I knew I would not tell you. Your sex is never . . . shall we say—kinder? . . . than when in suspense.

LADY OXFORD. Hanging beside the coffin of Mahomet, as it were.

AUGUSTA. He is in a frightful temper. I have been giving him good advice.

LADY OXFORD [*to* BYRON] I hope you do not mean to take it.

BYRON. Why not? For once in a way. I am sick of scenes and have imbibed a taste for something like quiet.

LADY OXFORD. That should not be hard to find. We are not all Bedlamites. [*A curious look passes between her and* BYRON. *Music which has stopped begins again.*]

BYRON. Let us get out of this carousel. [*Goes off with* AUGUSTA *and* LADY OXFORD. *As they go they pass* CAROLINE *returning with* WILLIAM LAMB. *She displays agitation on seeing* BYRON *with* LADY OXFORD. WILLIAM *covers her indiscretion with a casual and amiable salutation and leads her down to sofa where they sit facing each other. Dancing goes on.*]

CAROLINE. Say it! Say it and have done with it!

WILLIAM [*slight drawl*] What shall I say?

CAROLINE. Tell me I am making a fool of myself! Say what is in your mind!

WILLIAM. What good would that do? We should only provide a show for half London. Of which the other half by tomorrow noon would have all the details.

CAROLINE. You are too bored—you are too lazy to stop me—if I were slipping into hell.

WILLIAM [*with a slight yawn*] I am too lazy to attempt the impossible.

CAROLINE [*laughing wildly*] You are right. It is impossible. Not the devil himself shall stop me.

WILLIAM [*impassively*] He may have other souls to fry.

CAROLINE. You know what I feel for Byron—and you laugh at me.

WILLIAM. It is fashionable to be in love with him. You are always in the mode.

CAROLINE [*fiercely*] You think it will pass.

WILLIAM. Fashions do.

CAROLINE. You despise him.

WILLIAM. I hear he describes himself as "the hot-pressed darling of the drawing-rooms." [*Laughs indolently.*]

CAROLINE. It is a lie.

WILLIAM. Gently—gently! [*Smouldering sidewise look at her. Controls himself instantly and smiles.*] Shall we go back into the card-room . . . now you have seen that he is otherwise engaged?

CAROLINE. Your violence as as bad as my own. Only you cover it . . . with a sneer. I will not bear it. I will not be taunted. . . . [*Trembles with rage.*]

WILLIAM [*rising . . . speaks more kindly but still with appearance of indolent indifference.*] Why can't you let it alone, Caro?

[CAROLINE *does not answer. He shrugs and goes away. The music stops. Dancers drift away.* CAROLINE *sits in a deserted room weeping. While she sits there* BYRON *returns. He sees her and starts to turn back . . . hesitates then comes down to the sofa. She hears him coming and lifts a tragic face that brightens to wild delight. Rises to meet him and before he can stop her flings herself into his arms. As she does so her fan falls to the floor and lies apparently unnoticed.*]

CAROLINE. Byron . . . when I see you . . . I see nothing else . . . I am in a dream!

BYRON [*gently disengaging her arms*] The rest of the world is not, however.

CAROLINE. I never see you without wishing to cry.

BYRON [*trying to jest*] You might have waited for my coming.

CAROLINE. How pale you are! If any painter could paint me that face as it is . . . [*Takes his face between her palms.*] I would give him anything I possess on earth!

BYRON. God knows I wish you happy. . . . [*Drawing her hands down and holding them.*]

CAROLINE [*passionately*] Don't be so cold . . . one moment like this—it's worth God knows what!

BYRON [*rather grimly*] It's at least worth concealing. [*He releases her hands, stoops for her fan and presents it to her as people begin to come back into room.*]

CURTAIN

ACT ONE

Scene IV

BYRON'S *rooms, St. James's Street, London.*
TIME: *August 1812.*
[*Room is larger and more elaborate than in Reddish's Hotel. Plenty of books about. At upper right, wide opening into small entrance hall. Fireplace at left with sofa one side, armchair the other. Table near window which is at right and opens onto street. Table covered with writing materials and books. At upper left door opens into bedroom. When curtain rises* BYRON *is sparring in centre of room with* JACKSON, *an ex-pugilist. They continue briskly for some moments when they stop and* BYRON *stands grinning happily at him.*]

JACKSON. Not bad, m'lord, not bad!

BYRON. I'm in very good wind, eh?

JACKSON. Never better. And you are not in flesh.

BYRON. I live like a monk.

JACKSON [*sly pleasantry*] I thought you said that last night . . .

BYRON [*airily*] Oh, that! . . . a mere episode. I dined at the Cocoa with Hobhouse . . . sat from six till midnight. . . . [*Puts up his hands.* JACKSON *does the same. They spar again.* BYRON *talks between blows.*] We drank between us one bottle of champagne . . . six of claret . . . neither of which wines ever affects me.

JACKSON. No headache after . . . ?

BYRON. Neither then . . . nor now. . . .

JACKSON. Your lordship is a wonder. . . .

BYRON. The ninth, Jack . . . of any age. [*Stops again.*] Well—shall we cry quits for today?

JACKSON. You will want me tomorrow?

BYRON. Considerably earlier. Say well before noon.

JACKSON. [*Takes off gloves. So does* BYRON. *Both men are in shirt and trousers.* JACKSON *puts on his coat—a very good one—which is on the back of a chair. He takes both pairs of gloves.*] Good day, Lord Byron. [*He has considerable dignity.*]

BYRON [*cheerfully*] Good day to you, Jack!

[JACKSON *goes out. He encounters* AUGUSTA *coming in. Stands aside and bows with courtly air.*]

AUGUSTA [*Coming into room when* JACKSON *has gone*] I may come in, Byron?

BYRON. *You,* Augusta! I thought you had gone back to the country a week ago. [*They meet affectionately. She sits on the couch by the fireplace. He stands with an elbow on the mantelshelf looking down at her.*]

AUGUSTA. My dressmaker keeps me in town. Was that your Emperor of Pugilism I passed coming in?

BYRON. [*Smiles and nods.*] I have been boxing with him daily this past month.

AUGUSTA. Such violent exercise. Doesn't it tire you?

BYRON. The more violent the fatigue, the better my spirits for the rest of the day. Today I have boxed an hour, written an ode to Napoleon Bonaparte, copied it, eaten

six biscuits, drunk four bottles of soda water . . . all since rising at ten o'clock . . . Gentleman Jackson, I assure you is my salvation . . . my pugilistic pastor and master.

AUGUSTA. I am glad to find you so well. I have been a little uneasy this last day or so. . . .

BYRON. As well come out with it, Goose. You were never born for diplomacy.

AUGUSTA. I had hoped your . . . feeling . . .

BYRON [*cynically*] For whom?

AUGUSTA. Oh, Byron . . . I did hope that she had made up her mind to be sensible about you.

BYRON [*dryly*] It is not a virtue I inspire in your sex.

AUGUSTA. I was at tea, yesterday . . . with—well never mind whom. . . .

BYRON. Any of the Melbourne House lot will do.

AUGUSTA. And I heard . . . quite indirectly . . .

BYRON. With all the obliquity of a thunderbolt—no doubt.

AUGUSTA. Lady Caroline's mother has been urging her to go to Ireland with William Lamb and herself.

BYRON. Has not that unhappy country suffered enough?

AUGUSTA. For God's sake, be serious Byron. She refuses to go.

BYRON. And what is that to me? I have not seen her in weeks. [*Impatiently.*] I intend to have nothing further to do with an affair which has wasted my time and destroyed all my plans for the best part of a year.

AUGUSTA. You don't know how you relieve my mind.

BYRON. I will relieve it yet further. Shall I show you a document which I received yesterday from Lady Melbourne?

AUGUSTA [*puzzled*] About Lady Caroline?

BYRON [*goes to table and searches among papers*] Lady Melbourne, my dear sister, has more than one niece. [AUGUSTA *follows him. He finds paper, stands glancing over it. She waits, watching him hopefully.*]

AUGUSTA. Byron . . . marriage in that quarter . . . are you actually discussing it with Lady Melbourne? I should be so happy.

BYRON [*as if feeling his way*] Caroline tells me that her cousin is already engaged.

AUGUSTA. And you would believe Lady Caroline—in such a case? [*With meaning.*]

BYRON [*gesture of putting the question aside*] In *any* case . . . [*flourishes paper*] this, Augusta, is the result of a casual inquiry—by Lady Melbourne of Miss Milbanke . . . at my instigation. . . . As to what qualities the young lady would desire in a husband.

[AUGUSTA *looks somewhat startled.*]

AUGUSTA. Surely Annabella must realize—you would be a brilliant match for her.

BYRON [*makes a gesture of attention*] She has drawn my very likeness. [*Begins to read. Standing in negligent attitude leaning against table as he does so.*] . . . As she has a temper that is easily provoked, she would like a man who could habitually control his own. [*He cocks an inquiring eye at* AUGUSTA.]

AUGUSTA. You do—at times . . . [*Stops uneasily.*]

BYRON. Let that pass. He must have consistent principles of Duty . . . delightful word! . . . governing strong and generous feelings. . . .

AUGUSTA [*eagerly*] Oh, Byron . . . no man was ever kinder at heart than you.

BYRON. Wait, dear girl . . . these feelings are to be reduced under the command of Reason. [*Rolls the R slightly as in oratory.*]

AUGUSTA. [*Despairingly.*] You will never do it.

BYRON. Genius she does not demand . . . [*Silences* AUGUSTA *who begins indignantly to speak.*] . . . but would *accept* it if united with these other qualities.

AUGUSTA. [*Gasping.*] Would accept!

BYRON. His affections must be equable . . . not subject to caprice. Now *there* I might give satisfaction. [AUGUSTA *giggles uncontrollably.*] He need not be wealthy but must have enough to maintain her in her present station. That's only fair. [*Momentarily serious—reads.*] Rank does not matter. . . .

AUGUSTA. Of course—since she has none as yet of her own.

BYRON. But good connections are to be desired. Altogether reasonable, isn't it?

AUGUSTA. Oh, entirely! [*Snickers faintly again, watching* BYRON'S *face.*]

BYRON. She does not regard beauty. . . . [*Walks over to the mirror hanging on wall lower right and inspects himself solemnly.*] That's a pity!

AUGUSTA. Was she serious—when she wrote this?

BYRON. No regard—h'm— But she *must* covenant for the manners of a gentleman.

AUGUSTA. Byron . . . I cannot bear it. [*Begins to laugh helplessly.*]

BYRON. [*Holding up a finger.*] Finally—by way of an after-thought . . . [*Dramatic pause.*] there must be no insanity in his family. [*Slaps paper down on table, regards* AUGUSTA *for a moment with a twisted grin then breaks into laughter louder than hers. They are roaring happily together when there is a knock at the door and* FLETCHER *coming in from the bedroom upper left admits* HOBHOUSE.]

HOBHOUSE. Well, Byron . . . good afternoon, Mrs. Leigh. . . . I am happy to find him in such spirits. . . .

BYRON [*wiping tears of mirth from his eyes*] Come in Hobby. Are you still in the doldrums from last night's excesses? Your face is as long as my arm.

HOBHOUSE. [*Not too brightly.*] I have a mind to leave off wine altogether.

BYRON. So you don't leave off wine and me at the same time. Come, come, man . . . you know water does not agree with you. What have you been doing since we parted? Sitting in the ashes of a ruined life? [*Motions him to sit down.* AUGUSTA *sits also.* BYRON *roams restlessly to and fro.*]

HOBHOUSE. I have been at luncheon with a party.

BYRON. Not the best treatment for an aching head.

HOBHOUSE [*significantly*] Lord Melbourne was my neighbour.

AUGUSTA. Byron . . . I beg you . . . listen. . . .

HOBHOUSE. Your speech on the Framework Bill came under discussion.

BYRON. I thought you were going to say on the future of Ireland. Well . . . [*with sardonic amusement*] what did they say of my maiden effort? That even the Bishops forgot to yawn? That it put the Lord Chancellor out of humour?

HOBHOUSE [*unsmiling*] You were spoken of as espousing the cause of the workers against your own order.

BYRON. I have no order. I am my own man or I am nobody's.

HOBHOUSE. Treasonable was the word used.

AUGUSTA. No . . . no!

HOBHOUSE. Lord Melbourne was bitter.

AUGUSTA. Oh, Mr. Hobhouse . . . if you could make Byron see—I have tried in vain.

BYRON [*blazing out*] What have I to do with Lord Melbourne? . . . and what has he to do with me? Do I wear his livery?

HOBHOUSE [*hesitating*] I am not given to gossip as you know, Byron, but the place was buzzing with a story . . . you mentioned Ireland. . . .

AUGUSTA. I have been telling him.

BYRON [*furiously*] And I tell you both . . . I have done with all that. It was over weeks ago.

[*Knock at door.* FLETCHER *appears from bedroom, admits fair-faced delicate boy apparently thirteen or fourteen years old, dressed in a scarlet huzzar jacket*

and pantaloons trimmed in front in much the same manner with silver buttons and twisted silver lace with which the narrow slit cuffs of his jacket are also embroidered. He holds a feathered fancy hat in his hand. At the moment of his entrance BYRON *is half facing door. An expression of acute surprised annoyance and dismay comes over his face. With a muttered excuse he turns and goes as quickly as his limp will allow to the small entrance hall. At a word there from him,* FLETCHER *retires once more to the bedroom and the page sits down on a chair to wait.* BYRON *returns to the sitting room. Meantime* AUGUSTA *has endeavoured to conceal suspicion and surprise from* HOBHOUSE'S *questioning eyes.*]

BYRON. A very gay party, your luncheon, eh Hobby?

HOBHOUSE. I thought it might interest you to hear . . .

BYRON. Like yourself I have no ear for gossip but the story's amusing enough.

AUGUSTA [*rising rather hurriedly*] I shall be late to meet a friend.

BYRON [*significantly*] If it's the same friend as yesterday, make her my compliments and tell her I shall do my utmost to further her wishes.

AUGUSTA. My carriage is below . . . may I drop you, Mr. Hobhouse?

HOBHOUSE. It would be very kind of you.

[HOBHOUSE *and* AUGUSTA *go out. When the door has closed behind them* BYRON *with a gesture of violent impatience beckons the page into the centre of the room.*]

BYRON. I never knew till this moment of what rashness you are capable.

PAGE. [*Caroline.*] Byron . . . for God's sake, do not be angry with me! [*Begins to sob.*]

BYRON. I would not have believed—after what has passed between us—after I quit you . . . or rather you from a sense of duty to your husband and your mother quit me. . . .

CAROLINE. Against my will . . . never say it wasn't cruelly against my will!

BYRON [*grimly*] We agreed then—did we not?—that the parting was for good.

CAROLINE. You said so. You swore it. I promised nothing.

BYRON. I should never have trusted to your honour. You have none.

CAROLINE. I love you beyond honour. I had it till I gave it to you.

BYRON [*with a groan*] My poor Caro . . . You will ruin us both. Twice in one day I have heard . . .

CAROLINE. You cannot have heard the worst. I have just come from Melbourne House.

BYRON. In that garb? Bedlam would be too tame for you.

CAROLINE. I keep these clothes at a room—no one knows—I stopped there to change. I was afraid if I came as myself—you would not let me in. [*There is for a moment an almost touching simplicity about her. She is trembling all over, is on the verge of collapse.* BYRON *draws her over to the couch, sits beside her holding both her hands.*]

BYRON. Now that you're here . . . what has happened? You have quarrelled with your mother?

CAROLINE. How did you know? [*Violently.*] I have quarrelled with the whole unspeakable tribe. When I said I would not go to Ireland . . .

BYRON. In which you were mistaken . . .

CAROLINE [*stares*] No—no—no!

BYRON [*tenderly*] If I ask it . . .

CAROLINE. You cannot be so cruel. . . .

BYRON. Well—when you said you would not go . . .

CAROLINE. They brought in Lord Melbourne—to bully me.

BYRON [*quickly*] That would have been at what time?

CAROLINE [*perplexed*] Late this afternoon. . . . I have just come from him. He said he found my behaviour . . .

BYRON [*sarcastically*] Not *irrational?*

CAROLINE. Intolerable. A disgrace to the family whose name I bear. [*Sobs again . . . becomes almost incoherent.*] You don't know, Byron . . . you cannot imagine what insult I have endured . . . because of you.

BYRON. *My* name was brought into it then?

CAROLINE. Nothing too low for them to say of you.

BYRON. So Hobby was right.

CAROLINE. At last . . . [*Catches her breath.*] I lost my temper.

BYRON [*grimly mocking amazement*] Not *you,* sweet!

CAROLINE. Do not—do not make light of it! I told Lord Melbourne that if I were to be persecuted I would endure it no longer . . . I would fly to you.

BYRON. To which Lord Melbourne replied . . .

CAROLINE [*with almost hysterical vehemence*] He told me to fly and be damned. Then I ran out of the house.

BYRON. I see. Well—you have flown, Caro. The damnation will doubtless appear in good time.

CAROLINE [*sobbing bitterly*] You are angry with me.

BYRON. You must go back to your mother at once.

CAROLINE. I will never see her again.

BYRON. You will do as I say . . . if you love me.

CAROLINE. You could never never say I do not love you. . . . [*Flings her arms about him. As she does so a knock at the door.* FLETCHER *goes. Admits* LADY OXFORD. BYRON, *having disengaged* CAROLINE *stands waiting. He shows no perturbation, only a cool amusement.* CAROLINE *becomes violently excited.* FLETCHER *goes back into bedroom.* LADY OXFORD *comes into sitting room. She is as cool as* BYRON.]

LADY OXFORD. Tell me if I intrude, Byron.

BYRON. You are never other than a delightful surprise. Let me take your cloak, Lady Oxford. [*Goes toward her.* CAROLINE *maddened dashes between them.*]

CAROLINE. This is no surprise. This is by arrangement.

LADY OXFORD [*unmoved and amused*] Charming, Lady Caroline! Forgive me for not recognizing you sooner.

CAROLINE. Byron—you have been unfaithful!

BYRON [*to* LADY OXFORD] I do not know if you dislike a scene as much as I do?

LADY OXFORD. I am rather inclined to serenity. [*Smiles calmly.*]

CAROLINE [*half maddened flinging herself round toward* BYRON] Swear to me—swear you are true! I will believe you if you swear.

BYRON [*shrugs resignedly, looking at* LADY OXFORD] Who would dare say No, within arm's length?

CAROLINE [*violently—to* LADY OXFORD] Have you no shame?

LADY OXFORD. None that I think of at the moment. Of course one never knows what a day may bring forth. [*Smiles sweetly on* BYRON.]

CAROLINE [*puts hands to head*] God—I think I shall lose my mind!

BYRON [*speaking more kindly*] She is not herself, Lady Oxford.

CAROLINE [*wildly*] As you came in at the door—he was telling me he loved me.

LADY OXFORD. I am sorry to have interrupted what was apparently so convincing a performance.

CAROLINE [*wilder yet*] No woman on earth but me . . .

LADY OXFORD [*to* BYRON] Foolish—with your opportunities—so to limit yourself. [*She looks into* BYRON'S *eyes and laughs softly. She is completely untouched by* CAROLINE'S *ranting.*]

BYRON. Thank God for tranquillity like yours! [*She turns.*] Are you going?

LADY OXFORD. It seems Lady Caroline cannot wait. I can. [*Lays book on his table.*] The apparent purpose of this visit. [*Laughs again with delightful amiability.*] No—do not see me out. I leave you to your devotions. [*Goes.*]

CAROLINE [*crazily—when the outer door has closed*] She is the most licentious woman in the world.

BYRON. But the most civil, my dear Caroline, you will admit.

CAROLINE [*with a great sob*] I should have killed her.

BYRON [*realizing need for immediate settling of the situation.*] I am going to fetch you a cloak . . . then I am going to call a cab and take you back to Melbourne House.

CAROLINE. No—no—no!

BYRON. It is the only way.

CAROLINE. They will take me to Ireland. They will not let me see you.

BYRON. I will write . . . [*He puts his arms about her. She strains him to her in a feverish embrace.*] it is the only way—believe me. We are in a more dangerous position than you know.

CAROLINE [*with a shrill laugh*] We! That's to say *you* are!

BYRON. As you like.

CAROLINE. Shake my confidence and—eight guineas, a mail and a packet can bring me to London in a day. Remember!

BYRON. I am not likely to forget. [CAROLINE *begins to*

cry pitifully.] Poor, poor little Carol . . . why will you not recognize the inevitable?

CAROLINE [*drawing back to look up in his face*] There are tears in your eyes. [*Almost with awe.*]

BYRON [*simply*] You know I am not apt to shed them. [*He turns abruptly.*] Wait here. . . . [*Goes into bedroom . . . is heard calling* FLETCHER.]

[CAROLINE *catches up* LADY OXFORD'S *book—inspects it closely and drops it again. Sits down at writing table and gazes before her tragically. Presently she draws paper and pen to her and begins to write rapidly. While she is in the midst of this* BYRON *returns ready for the street with a cloak over his arm. She goes to him at once and he wraps the cloak about her.*]

BYRON. Were you composing a curse? [*He smiles with bitter tenderness.*]

CAROLINE. I was writing that you cried when we parted. Kiss me, Byron . . . [*He kisses her reluctantly.*] . . . no—no—like that first time! [*He kisses her long and passionately. When he releases her she still lifts her ecstatic haggard face.*] Mad—and bad—and dangerous to know!

BYRON. A very pretty epitaph, my dear—we must leave word to have it cut on your tombstone as well as mine. [*They go out together.*]

CURTAIN

ACT ONE

Scene V

Supper-room at Heathcote House.
Time: *July, 1813.*
At rear of stage large opening leading to dance-room. Dancers not in sight. At upper right buffet table with food and punch bowl. FOOTMEN *in attendance. Sofa at lower left. Door at lower right where guests enter. When curtain rises* BYRON *is seated on sofa talking to* LADY MELBOURNE. *Other guests,* MEN *and* WOMEN, *standing about in groups.*

LADY MELBOURNE. I missed you last night.

BYRON. At Lady Grey's? Should I have gone? I spent the evening alone. I have begun a new tale.

LADY MELBOURNE. I said I missed *you.* You missed nothing. All the women in the middle of the room, hating each other and talking. The men sprinkled about in corners in dull duets. [*She glances around the room and smiles slightly.*]

LADY HEATHCOTE [*approaches.* BYRON *rises*] Dear Lady Melbourne . . . I had hoped to see Lady Caroline here tonight. Am I to be disappointed?

LADY MELBOURNE. I'm sure I can't say, Lady Heathcote.

LADY HEATHCOTE. She is such a correct and animated waltzer. [*Smiles sweetly and drifts away.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. Sit down, Byron, and leave off scowling. Your plague and mine has been enjoying herself hugely of late. William came in yesterday and found her in tears—at which he demanded to know if you had affronted her.

BYRON [*amazed and outraged*] I have not seen her. [*Recovers himself.*] If I speak to her he is insulted—is that it?

LADY MELBOURNE. And if you *don't* speak to her *she* is insulted. You had far better have married while she was in Ireland. There, my dear Byron, was your opportunity. [*He begins to speak. She interrupts.*] I know . . . Lady Oxford sailed from Portsmouth only a week ago . . . you saw her off I'm told.

BYRON. And to tell you the truth . . . I feel a relief I hadn't expected. [LADY MELBOURNE *laughs.*] Never mind . . . I can still make you laugh your wicked laugh . . . that's some consolation. [*Suddenly.*] Why won't *you* go off with me?

LADY MELBOURNE. Why indeed?

BYRON. Our elopement would have greater effect than any event of the kind since Eve ran away with the apple.

LADY MELBOURNE. If I were thirty years younger I should be about your neck. [*Alters tone abruptly.*] Byron . . . I have a message for you tonight which I have not delivered.

BYRON [*wearily*] From Caroline? I am sure it is a sickening subject for us both.

LADY MELBOURNE. I spoke this afternoon with Anna-

bella. [BYRON *at once becomes interested.*] I am requested to say that she has been reading your poetry with fresh pleasure.

BYRON [*frowning intently*] My poetry!

LADY MELBOURNE. Won't that do as well as the next thing for an opening wedge?

BYRON. But after her refusal of me last October . . .

LADY MELBOURNE. Must a young woman be consistent before you believe her?

BYRON. I thought consistency her mainspring.

LADY MELBOURNE. That's as it may be. At present she feels prompted to write to you and renew the acquaintance.

BYRON. I don't know what to make of her.

LADY MELBOURNE [*with a very grave face*] She would even incur the risk of being called a Flirt. [*She and* BYRON *look at each other a moment in silence and then both begin to laugh.*]

BYRON. I wish to God she'd known her mind sooner. My heart always alights on the nearest perch. If it is withdrawn it goes God knows where.

LADY MELBOURNE [*abrupt change to earnest*] I have advised her to write you.

BYRON. You say that with significance.

LADY MELBOURNE. I say it as I mean it. Byron . . . I have been your friend from the first, have I not?

BYRON [*kisses her hand*] God bless you . . . you have done what you could to make me act sensibly.

LADY MELBOURNE. I want to see you married . . . and before too long.

BYRON. You cannot think higher of Miss Milbanke than I do.

LADY MELBOURNE [*shrugs*] Annabella is a good girl . . . a bit of a prude perhaps . . . but no matter. She will make you a very good wife. What I am daily more sure of . . . what I beg you to realize is . . . you have got your affairs into such a tangle that marriage is your only salvation.

BYRON [*dryly*] I have moments of realization. Never fear.

LADY MELBOURNE. Annabella herself has reopened the way. If you do not marry her now—it will be your own fault. And I shall be sorely tempted to wash my hands of you.

BYRON. You think marriage would save me, do you?

[*While he is speaking* LADY CAROLINE LAMB *comes in at the door at the right of the room accompanied by* WILLIAM LAMB. LADY HEATHCOTE *goes forward to meet them. After a moment's murmured greeting* LADY HEATHCOTE *and* CAROLINE *come across the room while* WILLIAM *at sight of* BYRON *goes toward the rear and out.*]

LADY MELBOURNE [*to* BYRON] Give me your arm. I want a word with my son. [*She rises and* BYRON *rises with her and gives her his arm. They are turning toward the rear of the room as* CAROLINE *and* LADY HEATHCOTE *come up.*]

LADY HEATHCOTE. Come, Lady Caroline . . . Is not that music inviting? You must begin.

CAROLINE. Oh, yes—I am in a merry humour! Good evening, aunt.

LADY MELBOURNE [*pausing reluctantly*] Good evening. I see William is for the card-room.

CAROLINE [*going close to* BYRON *and speaking in an undertone but quite loud enough for the others to hear*] I conclude I may waltz *now!*

BYRON [*draws back with icy anger*] Do! with everybody in turn. I shall have pleasure in seeing you.

LADY HEATHCOTE [*nervously*] You have always so many partners, Lady Caroline. [*Draws her away.*]

LADY MELBOURNE [*to* BYRON] What are you thinking of—to anger her so?

BYRON [*stubborn rage*] If she has either pride or feeling that should be sufficient.

LADY MELBOURNE. She had almost settled down with my son again.

BYRON. If she loves *him*—why not leave me in peace? If *me*—why *this?*

LADY MELBOURNE. I am going to find him. No—do not come with me. I see your sister looking this way. No doubt she is as uneasy as I am.

[AUGUSTA *leaves a group with which she has been standing and comes over to* LADY MELBOURNE *and* BYRON.]

AUGUSTA. Good evening, Lady Melbourne—a delightful party, isn't it?

LADY MELBOURNE. Ask your brother for his opinion, my dear. And when he has told you persuade him for his own sake to tell no one else. [*She moves away with arrogant dignity but just in going taps* BYRON *with her fan in affectionate anxiety.*]

AUGUSTA. Byron—what is it? I saw Lady Caroline's face as she left you.

BYRON [*still in a sombre fury*] I have been patient long enough. She has written me furious letters . . . threatening my life even, but now . . . to make me a public laughing stock . . . By God . . . I'll have no more of it!

AUGUSTA [*putting her hand gently on his arm*] Don't Byron, . . . don't. You will have every eye in the room on you.

BYRON [*slightly quieter*] Then let her keep away from me. . . .

AUGUSTA [*soothingly*] Lady Melbourne will see to that.

BYRON [*laughs harshly*] Lady Melbourne no more than any one else can control her. . . .

AUGUSTA. If not Lady Melbourne—her husband.

BYRON [*sullenly*] Too cursedly indifferent.

AUGUSTA. Don't think . . . don't speak any more of it. What were you and Lady Melbourne discussing so earnestly?

BYRON. Annabella has held out the olive branch.

AUGUSTA [*eagerly*] Oh, Byron . . . I'm convinced that would be the solution!

BYRON. Marriage with a Puritan.

AUGUSTA. Marriage with *anyone* eligible . . . so you liked her well enough. I have thought for more than a year it is the only thing . . . don't laugh at me, Byron . . . I am terrified of Lady Caroline. She has no common decency in her. She will stop at nothing to punish you.

BYRON. Dear girl . . . you look pale . . . come over to the table . . . a glass of Lady Heathcote's punch will set you up.

[*They go over to the table together.* BYRON *is getting* AUGUSTA *a glass of punch when* CAROLINE *comes back into the room. She sees* BYRON *and goes at once to the table. He pays no attention to her at first, continues waiting on* AUGUSTA. *Whereupon* CAROLINE *picks up a knife from the table and forces his attention.*]

CAROLINE. I mean to use this.

[*Bystanders turn to listen.* BYRON *turns frozen with fury.*]

BYRON. Against me, I presume?

CAROLINE. Byron! [*A maddened scream. Turns to run away with the knife. Turmoil ensues. Women cry:* "Stop her . . . she will kill herself" . . . *She is surrounded by two or three who try to get the knife away from her. In the struggle her hand is cut and blood runs down her gown.* BYRON *at the beginning of the struggle has walked away toward the sofa. He stands there not looking at the group about the table. Now* WILLIAM LAMB *appears at the rear with* LADY MELBOURNE. *He goes quickly to* CAROLINE.]

WILLIAM. Caro . . . poor child . . . what has happened?

CAROLINE [*clings to him*] William . . . help me . . . [*Faints in his arms.* LADY MELBOURNE, *as* WILLIAM *carries* CAROLINE *out, comes down to where* BYRON *is standing.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. Is this your first step on the road to matrimony?

BYRON. You saw—and heard?

LADY MELBOURNE [*grimly*] Quite enough.

BYRON [*with contemptuous indifference*] Only a trick.

LADY MELBOURNE. Undoubtedly. But I'm afraid, Byron, it's not you that has taken it.

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

ACT TWO

Scene I

Drawing-room at Seaham, home of SIR RALPH *and* LADY MILBANKE.

TIME: *December 30, 1814.*

Ten o'clock of a winter's evening, fire burning, curtains drawn, pleasant but undistinguished room characteristic of prosperous country people. At right of room a fireplace with large armchairs at either side. At left, door opening into hallway. At rear door to dining room. At lower right, window looking onto drive. Comfortable chairs about. Table and cupboard with books and ornaments.

When curtain rises, LADY MILBANKE *is seated on one side of the fireplace and facing the audience.* MRS. CLERMONT *is seated on the other with her back to the audience.* SIR RALPH *is seated on the left side of the room, reading. The women are both knitting.* MRS. CLERMONT, ANNABELLA'S GOVERNESS, *is dark, quiet, sallow and with an insinuating sweetness but without frankness and sincerity.* LADY MILLBANKE *is an elderly woman, nervous and irritable.* SIR RALPH, *elderly man, pleasant but frail and futile.*

MRS. CLERMONT [*slight note of warning*] In a moment it will be ten o'clock. [SIR RALPH *and* LADY MILBANKE *both fidget but make no answer. Significantly.*] Don't you find it strange, Lady Milbanke?

LADY MILBANKE [*exasperated*] Very strange indeed, Mrs. Clermont.

MRS. CLERMONT [*archly*] A bridegroom is supposed to be impatient— [*Giggles.*]

SIR RALPH [*testily*] We don't know what may have happened. Their carriage may have broken down . . . they may have been otherwise delayed. [*Resumes reading.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. Lord Byron *said* he would leave London six days ago. That should have him here . . .

LADY MILBANKE. He was to stop at Six Mile Bottom to see his sister, Mrs. Leigh.

MRS. CLERMONT. I'm sure I don't know how to console poor dear Annabella. After all she can't help feeling his duty is with his bride . . . not with his sister.

SIR RALPH. Annabella should not fret. Lord Byron can be trusted to do the right thing. [*Rises and goes to window with slightly unsteady gait.*]

LADY MILBANKE. Annabella is not accustomed to fret unnecessarily.

MRS. CLERMONT. [*As* SIR RALPH *jerks open the curtains and peers out.*] No sign of them yet, Sir Ralph?

SIR RALPH. There's a mist rising. Soon you won't be able to see six yards from the door. [*Grumbles.*] Damned nuisance! [*Turns away from window.*]

LADY MILBANKE. Careful—the rector might hear you!

SIR RALPH. Where's *he* got to? He disappeared directly dinner was over. [*Eases himself into chair again.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. He's in the library with Annabella,

Sir Ralph. I hope he may be able to quiet her. In her present state I'm sure it's more than I or any one else can do.

LADY MILBANKE. Thank Heaven, in a moment like this she has at least the comfort of deep religious feeling.

MRS. CLERMONT. Hers is a saintly nature—but it should not be tried too far.

SIR RALPH. [*Reassuringly.*] As I say . . . we don't know what may have happened. [*Change to doubt.*] Still . . . most incomprehensible . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. *Most* myst*e*rious! . . . Poor Annabella. . . .

[LADY MILBANKE *drops scissors.* MRS. CLERMONT *rises and hands them to her.*]

SIR RALPH. This is all nonsense! [*Exasperated.*] Lord Byron is delayed. For what reason we can't tell. And there's nothing to be done about it.

LADY MILBANKE. I am going to my room. That's what I shall do about it. [*Folds knitting and moves to rise.*]

SIR RALPH. [*Protestingly.*] Now, now, my dear . . .

MRS. CLERMONT [*helping* LADY MILBANKE] She has had a tiring day, Sir Ralph.

SIR RALPH [*starting up and cocking his head*] Did I hear wheels?

LADY MILBANKE [*wearily*] We have all heard wheels a hundred times tonight. [*Rises helped by* MRS. CLERMONT.]

SIR RALPH. [*Fussily.*] This is going to be deuced awkward for me.

LADY MILBANKE. I advise you to retire as well.

SIR RALPH. I shall do nothing of the sort. . . .

MRS. CLERMONT [*insinuatingly*] A gentleman of fashion like Lord Byron accustomed to late hours may very well not arrive before morning.

LADY MILBANKE. Lord Byron or no Lord Byron I shall not wear myself out with waiting. I'll say good night to the Rector and try to induce Annabella to get some sleep. The whole household can't be kept on tenterhooks forever merely to suit his Lordship's convenience. [*Goes off leaning on* MRS. CLERMONT'S *arm.*]

SIR RALPH. [*When his wife and* MRS. CLERMONT *have disappeared jerks bell,* SERVANT *comes in.*] Bring the port, Robbins.

ROBBINS. Very good, Sir Ralph. [*Goes out.*]

[SIR RALPH *stands before the fire, scowling and fidgeting. Presently* ROBBINS *returns with decanter and glass on tray. Sets it down on small table near fireplace.*]

SIR RALPH. Bring another glass in case the Rector should like some before he goes.

ROBBINS. Yes, Sir Ralph. [*Goes out and returns with glass.*]

SIR RALPH. And we shall want a hot supper for Lord Byron and his companion when they arrive.

ROBBINS. Milady gave the order for a *cold* supper, sir. Mrs. Clermont said the cook was to let the fire go out and to retire, that Lord Byron would not arrive before morning, sir.

SIR RALPH. Confound it! There should be a *hot* supper. [*Grumbling.*] Most ungracious!

[ROBBINS *goes to window and starts to pull curtains, previously left open, hesitates then closes them.*]

ROBBINS. A carriage has just turned into the drive, sir.

SIR RALPH [*excited by the news*] A carriage . . . upon my word! At last! Tell your mistress . . . no, wait . . . I'll tell her myself. Show the gentlemen in here, I shall be back directly.

ROBBINS. Yes, Sir Ralph.

[SIR RALPH *goes hurriedly out.* ROBBINS *follows. Then* ROBBINS *reappears ushering in* BYRON. *He is in travelling cloak which* ROBBINS *takes.*]

ROBBINS. Sir Ralph will be down at once, your Lordship.

BYRON. My friend, Mr. Hobhouse, is seeing to the luggage, Robbins. Show him in here when he is ready. [*Throughout the scene* BYRON *is nervous and distrait.*]

[*There is a stir outside the door.* ANNABELLA *enters hurriedly.* ROBBINS *goes at once.* ANNABELLA *rushes up to* BYRON, *flings her arms about his neck and bursts into tears. She is looking rather dowdy . . . long and high dress.*]

BYRON [*endeavouring to quiet her*] Bell, my love . . . what's all this?

ANNABELLA [*sobbing*] I have never been so anxious . . . so humiliated.

BYRON [*stiffness appearing in manner*] You mean our slightly tardy arrival?

ANNABELLA. Slightly! . . . when you left London on the twenty-fourth and today is the thirtieth.

BYRON [*annoyance visible under pleasantry*] Well, my Princess of Parallelograms, I am not accustomed to travel on any schedule but my own. That is my entire explanation . . . if one is demanded of me. I trust you have been put to no inconvenience.

ANNABELLA [*touch of hysteria*] How can you speak to me so?

BYRON. Wipe your eyes and say no more about it. I hate to see a woman cry—particularly a woman with a skin like yours. [*He bestows an almost reluctant caress.*]

[SIR RALPH *enters with* HOBHOUSE. ANNABELLA *and* BYRON *separate at sound of their coming.*]

SIR RALPH. I am happy to welcome you, Lord Byron.

HOBHOUSE. Sir Ralph found me cluttering up the hall with our boxes, Byron.

ANNABELLA. Good evening, Mr. Hobhouse. [*Trifle stiffly.*] I trust you are not tired with your long journey—

[HOBHOUSE *bows over her hand.*]

HOBHOUSE. Not at all, Miss Milbanke. We broke it very pleasantly.

ANNABELLA. So I gathered. [BYRON *frowns.*] Father —has mother been told?

SIR RALPH. Your mother, my dear . . . [*Coughs to cover confusion.*] your mother I am sorry to say has retired—with a slight indisposition.

BYRON [*knowledgeable side-glance at* HOBHOUSE] Nothing serious, I hope.

SIR RALPH. She will be quite herself by morning, I am sure.

[MRS. CLERMONT *appears.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. Good evening, Lord Byron. Sir Ralph, the Rector wishes to say good night.

SIR RALPH [*with shaky heartiness*] Ask him to come in here, Mrs. Clermont.

[MRS. CLERMONT *goes out.*]

ANNABELLA. He is to marry us, Byron. I should like you to know him. A most devout and saintly man.

BYRON. You are not afraid to have me confront him in my present state of Grace?

ANNABELLA [*having completely recovered composure*] He will make allowances.

SIR RALPH. You're Church of England, of course, Mr. Hobhouse?

HOBHOUSE [*exchanging humorously startled glance with* BYRON.] I believe, sir, that was my mother's intention.

[*Enter* RECTOR. *Goes to* BYRON *at once and shakes hands rather unctuously while* ANNABELLA *looks on with satisfaction.*]

RECTOR. I am most happy to know you, Lord Byron. . . .

BYRON [*somewhat aloofly*] My friend, Mr. Hobhouse.

RECTOR [*shakes hands with* HOBHOUSE. *To* BYRON] My little pupil here [*puts hand on* ANNABELLA'S *shoul-*

der.] has been somewhat anxious for your safe arrival.]

BYRON. Entirely without cause I assure you.

RECTOR [*patting* ANNABELLA] We have prayed together over the approaching marriage.

BYRON [*rather haughty distaste*] Indeed?

RECTOR. I am sure all will be more than well.

BYRON. I hope so. Not having your access to the ear of the Eternal, I hesitate to predict.

SIR RALPH. You must let me see you on your way, Rector . . . [*Uneasily steers the* CLERIC *off in the midst of his good-byes.*]

ANNABELLA. Byron, you have dined?

BYRON [*more nervous than heretofore*] Don't trouble, Bell. . . .

ANNABELLA [*assuming a housewifely air*] I thought as much. You will excuse me, Mr. Hobhouse, if I leave you for a moment. [*She can hardly take her eyes off* BYRON'S *face.*]

BYRON. I had rather you did not trouble.

HOBHOUSE [*good-humouredly*] Don't listen to him, Miss Milbanke. He is very nearly starved and I confess I am the same.

ANNABELLA. [*To* BYRON *reproachfully.*] You should have told me. . . .

BYRON [*glancing toward decanter on table*] If Hobhouse and I might have a glass of your father's port—

ANNABELLA. Not until you have eaten. [*Air of proprietorship leaves* BYRON *almost staring.*] Have pa-

tience. There will be some cold chicken—from dinner —we expected you, you know [*reproachfully*] . . . I will call you when it is ready. [*Goes out smiling brightly.*]

[*When* ANNABELLA *has gone* BYRON *goes at once to the table, pours two glasses of port and hands* HOBHOUSE *one.*]

BYRON. I don't suppose there's such a thing as brandy to be had in these chaste precincts. [*They drink.*] Well, Hobby . . . I have been nicely taken over the coals for our late arrival.

HOBHOUSE. Don't ask me for sympathy. [*Affectionate raillery.*] Never was bridegroom in less haste. When you consider that in two days more you stand up to the altar . . .

BYRON [*moodily*] Damn it all . . . up to the last moment lawyers and their cursed settlements. . . .

HOBHOUSE. I'm still a trifle uneasy there, Byron. They have all the best of you—no question. One thousand pounds a year out of which you allow her three hundred for pin money . . . that's all her dowry! While *you* . . . you settle sixty thousand pounds on her. And that means you sell Newstead Abbey. Royally selfish, these old people!

BYRON. I preferred to err on the side of generosity. Anyhow, God bless her . . . she has nothing to do with it. [*Pours second glass of port and drains it. With swift change of mood breaks into reckless laugh.*] Cold chicken, eh? Funeral baked meats—no less!

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

Scene II

Drawing-room at 13 Piccadilly Terrace.
Time: *January 1816.*
Door at right opens into hall. Two windows at rear open on Piccadilly Terrace. Fireplace at left. Lower left, door into inner room. Tea table at lower right with sofa behind it and chair beside. Chairs beside fireplace and about room.
When Curtain rises BYRON *is standing with elbow on mantelshelf talking to* MOORE *who sits in chair beside fireplace. They are drinking brandy and soda. Bottles on nearby table.*

BYRON [*excited, interested, gay*] So you won't do anything for the drama?

MOORE. Damned if I will! Run your Drury Lane theatre without me!

BYRON. At times the thing's farcical. Essex has been endeavouring to persuade Keen not to get drunk . . . the consequence is Keen's never sober.

MOORE. How about yourself?

BYRON. You forget I am now a family man . . . with a daughter over a month old.

MOORE. What are you calling the child?

BYRON. Augusta Ada. The first for my sister who was

with Bell during her confinement. She's still here by the way. To go back to Drury Lane . . .

MOORE [*interrupting*] Strictly managerial there, are you?

BYRON [*cynically amused*] What d'ye mean? What've you been hearing?

MOORE. Oh, a likely bit of gossip about a Mrs. Mardyn —I think the name was—connected with the theatre. Some talk of a son even . . .

BYRON. By me? [*Laughs.*]

MOORE [*nods*] The gossips are busy. Hadn't they better be silenced?

[*Enter* MRS. CLERMONT *unnoticed.*]

BYRON. I am their favourite theme. I would not stir a step out of my way to prevent their indulging themselves. Slander will find its own level.

MRS. CLERMONT. Lady Melbourne is here, your lordship. . . .

BYRON [*turning as swiftly as his lameness will permit.*] Why the devil do you keep her ladyship waiting? [*His tone is almost savage.*]

LADY MELBOURNE [*entering*] I see age has not withered you Byron, nor domesticity staled your impetuous nature . . . good afternoon, Mr. Moore. It delights me to see you in London again.

BYRON [*kisses* LADY MELBOURNE'S *hand . . . turns again on* MRS. CLERMONT.] Say to your mistress that Lady Melbourne is here.

[MRS. CLERMONT *goes.*]

MOORE. The worst of being out of London, Lady Melbourne, is being out of your society.

LADY MELBOURNE [*with* BYRON'S *assistance seats herself on sofa beside tea table.* BYRON *sits on sofa also.* MOORE *on chair facing.*] Annabella is well I hope—[*To* BYRON.]

BYRON. Very well—up and about. You shall see for yourself.

LADY MELBOURNE. The child?

BYRON. Flourishing and reckoned large for her days.

MOORE. He might have been a happy father all his life.

BYRON. Time does wonders. I won't be too hasty in my happiness.

[LADY MELBOURNE *laughs.* ANNABELLA *enters . . . goes to* LADY MELBOURNE *with hand out.*]

ANNABELLA. Dear aunt . . . it is good of you to come. Mr. Moore, I trust we shan't intrude upon your conversation with Byron. . . .

MOORE. We have fairly exhausted our news. [*Rises to go.*]

BYRON [*rather irritably—his tone changes the moment* ANNABELLA *speaks.*] I'll have a word in the hall with you, Tom.

MOORE. Your servant, Lady Melbourne. It is a pleasure to see you looking so well, Lady Byron. [*He and* BYRON *go out.*]

ANNABELLA. I have told Mrs. Clermont to send tea in directly. [*Settles herself on sofa beside* LADY MELBOURNE.]

LADY MELBOURNE. Who is this woman? Has she been with you long?

ANNABELLA. My governess for years.

LADY MELBOURNE. She annoys Byron, I observe.

ANNABELLA [*expression of stubbornness, sweetness and light combined.*] He is apt to be annoyed by devotion not centred on himself.

MRS. CLERMONT [*brings in tea-tray—sets it on table before* ANNABELLA.] The parlour maid is not feeling well this afternoon. I have told her to rest for a bit. [*speaks with apparent humbleness but seats herself*]

ANNABELLA. Thank you, Mrs. Clermont. You are always considerate.

MRS. CLERMONT [*modestly*] I do my best.

ANNABELLA [*beginning to pour tea*] Sugar, aunt?

LADY MELBOURNE [*without looking at* MRS. CLERMONT] I should prefer a little privacy, Annabella.

MRS. CLERMONT [*resentment imperfectly concealed*] I beg your ladyship's pardon. [*Rises and leaves room.*]

ANNABELLA. I hope she is not hurt. [*Reproachfully.*] The most faithful creature on earth.

LADY MELBOURNE. I share Byron's aversion. She has a watchful eye. Sugar but no milk, Annabella, my dear. [ANNABELLA *pours tea and hands cup.*] Now tell me about little Miss Byron.

ANNABELLA. Perfectly well. She makes me laugh with her laughter.

LADY MELBOURNE. And you?

ANNABELLA. Well, indeed, and excellently taken care

of. Mrs. Leigh has been so kind . . . during my confinement and since . . . I really can't tell you. I can never forget it.

LADY MELBOURNE. I hear Byron has two new poems appearing.

ANNABELLA. The Siege of Corinth and Parisina. I copied both. [*Proudly.*]

LADY MELBOURNE. I never knew a man so driven by poetic energy. Does not Drury Lane take up a deal of his time now?

ANNABELLA [*dryly*] In more ways than one.

LADY MELBOURNE [*sets down her cup*] You are not enthusiastic then about Byron's theatrical ambitions? [*Watches her keenly.*]

ANNABELLA. When they are female I object to entertaining them at dinner.

LADY MELBOURNE. Nonsense, child. . . . [*Briskly.*] No reason a dinner table shouldn't be made amusing. [*Assumes air of casualness, patting a yawn.*]

[BYRON *enters from hall-way.*]

ANNABELLA. Shall I ring for fresh tea, Byron?

LADY MELBOURNE [*amiable malice*] Your parlour-maid is stricken, Byron, but Mrs. Clermont is at hand.

BYRON [*impatiently*] Bell, I thought as I came through the hall that I heard the child crying. It might be well for you to look in on her. . . .

ANNABELLA. She is quite safe with Mrs. Clermont . . . I shan't be long, aunt. [*Goes.*]

[BYRON *flings himself down in chair facing* LADY MEL-

BOURNE. *He is moody and harassed but smiles at her with tenderness and charm.*]

LADY MELBOURNE [*seriously and anxiously*] Things do not go well here, Byron.

BYRON. When did things ever go well for me?

LADY MELBOURNE. It is months since I have seen you alone. Tell me in a few words. I have heard that you are selling your library. Your debts must be . . .

BYRON. Frightful. My desk is swamped with duns and my doorstep inhabited chiefly by bailiffs.

LADY MELBOURNE. This establishment . . . [*Looks around her with expression of distress.*]

BYRON [*despondently*] Modest enough. We keep one carriage. We entertain . . . without ambition. [LADY MELBOURNE *is unable to repress a smile.*] Now what is in your wicked mind? You have heard . . .

LADY MELBOURNE. Ladies of Drury Lane. . . .

BYRON [*after a moment's bitter amusement*] I see your niece has been garrulous. Did she tell you that she ordered Mrs. Mardyn from the house?

LADY MELBOURNE [*pretending to be shocked*] Surely not! A public scene! What are wives coming to?

BYRON. I did not allow the lady to leave—naturally.

LADY MELBOURNE. Of course you know it has been widely discussed.

BYRON. I have not troubled to inquire. While we are on the subject of inquiries is there any truth in the rumour that the Lambs are once more about to separate?

LADY MELBOURNE [*shakes her head*] She and William are in the country together. [*Rather contemptuous.*] I have heard she is dabbling in some sort of writing. Surely Byron . . . you no longer see nor hear from her . . .

BYRON. That does not mean she has forgotten me—nor forgiven. I know—which is to say I *knew* . . . my Caro. She will never rest until she has destroyed me in some way or other.

LADY MELBOURNE. This is too absurdly low-spirited. . . .

BYRON. [*Laughs harshly.*] A malady which don't often assail me.

LADY MELBOURNE. Byron—an idea! Why not send Annabella and the child to her parents for a visit? Relieve yourself temporarily of the expense of this ménage . . . gain time in which to meet some of your debts . . . perhaps also . . . [*She pauses—sighs understandingly.*] a little solitude might not be bad for you both at the moment.

BYRON. Your idea has but one drawback. . . . I had it before you . . . and it was not approved.

[ANNABELLA *returns—comes down to sofa and reseats herself.*]

ANNABELLA. I have left her cooing sweetly to herself.

BYRON [*sardonically*] Mrs. Clermont?

LADY MELBOURNE [*rather hurriedly*] The blessed babe! Some day I must see her—when she is a trifle older. . . .

BYRON. And not so given to casting her bread upon the nearest bosom?

ANNABELLA [*stonily*] Byron has not much knowledge of infants.

LADY MELBOURNE. Not his fault, I am sure. [*She rises with a wicked glance at* BYRON *who bends over her hand briefly grinning.*] I am dining tonight with Lady Jersey . . . shall I convey your duty?

BYRON [*unexpected violence*] Anything but that! I am sick of the accursed word!

ANNABELLA [*with angelic forbearance*] Byron will put you in your carriage, aunt. I am still not equal to much exertion. [*She kisses* LADY MELBOURNE'S *cheek while* BYRON *looks on skeptically . . . after which* LADY MELBOURNE *turns with barely perceptible relief to* BYRON *and* LADY MELBOURNE *and* BYRON *go out. When they have gone,* ANNABELLA *rises suddenly, paces room with leashed agitation contradicting her apparent weakness. Very quietly with distinct wariness* MRS. CLERMONT *enters. Comes close to* ANNABELLA *who pauses alertly to listen.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. I have found it, your ladyship. [*Air of maleficent triumph.*]

ANNABELLA [*subdued vehemence*] Don't call me by that name . . . you are all I have about me of the old happy days . . . call me Annabella . . . as you used . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. Annabella. . . . I have found it. [*Significantly.*]

ANNABELLA. I have prayed that you would. [*Puts her hands up over her eyes nevertheless.*] Prayed that there might be something to explain this brutality . . . this cruelty. . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. In the cupboard—behind a stack of notebooks. [*Produces a small brown bottle. Holds it up to the light.*] While Mr. Moore was with his lordship I took my opportunity.

ANNABELLA [*in a stifled voice*] Put it away. I can't bear to look at it.

MRS. CLERMONT. I *thought* there must be something behind those rages of his. [*Grim satisfaction.*]

ANNABELLA. Insanity—that too might account . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. Not him! He knows what he's doing every moment of the day.

ANNABELLA [*stubbornly*] His nearest relations themselves have suggested it to me.

MRS. CLERMONT. They might have their reasons.

ANNABELLA [*sharply*] What do you mean? Speak out! You are forever hinting. . . .

MRS. CLERMONT [*suddenly all innocence*] There's Captain Byron, isn't there? His lordship's heir to the title. Why wouldn't he be glad to see his lordship put away?

ANNABELLA. That's too horrible. . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. If you think I will stand by quiet and see you wronged . . .

ANNABELLA. I know—I know . . . [*Clings to* MRS. CLERMONT'S *arm.*] your loyalty to my parents . . .

MRS. CLERMONT [*with venomous calm*] His lord-

ship's behaviour to me has been such from the first that if it weren't that I feel it my duty to stay on here . . .

ANNABELLA [*agitatedly*] You must not think of leaving me. . . .

MRS. CLERMONT. I shan't leave—I promise you that.

ANNABELLA. Indeed you must not. [*Imploringly.*] I should be lost without you. This drug now . . . what are we to do with it? If he misses it he will be in a savage fury. . . . [*Shudders.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. Leave all that to me. [*Regarding bottle critically.*] Better than taking it away—which would certainly put his lordship in a state—[*maliciously*] . . . I'll just empty it three-quarters and fill it up with water. . . .

ANNABELLA. You think it won't be noticed . . . ? [*She and* MRS. CLERMONT *put their heads together over the bottle.*]

MRS. CLERMONT. . . . I'll color the water . . . see it's brown . . . [*As she holds it for* ANNABELLA'S *better inspection the door at the side of the fireplace opens and* AUGUSTA *comes hurriedly into the room. When she sees* ANNABELLA *and* MRS. CLERMONT *in conference, she hesitates.*]

AUGUSTA. I have just come from tea with Mrs. Villiers, Annabella. She sends you her love.

[ANNABELLA *looks startled,* MRS. CLERMONT *assumes an air of amiable disinterest.*]

ANNABELLA [*unhappily*] Dearest Augusta . . . I am so glad you have come. Mrs. Clermont has made a terrible discovery. [AUGUSTA *looks at* MRS. CLERMONT

searchingly under cover of alarmed inquiry.] You know we feared . . . a drug of some sort?

AUGUSTA. *You* did . . .

ANNABELLA. Mrs. Clermont has found it.

MRS. CLERMONT [*once more produces bottle*] Laudanum! [*Distinct malice in triumph. Hands bottle to* AUGUSTA.]

AUGUSTA [*coldly to* MRS. CLERMONT.] Where . . . ?

ANNABELLA. In Byron's closet. . . .

AUGUSTA [*to* MRS. CLERMONT *with increased coldness and resentment*] You have been scarching my brother's belongings?

MRS. CLERMONT [*smugly*] At Lady Byron's request.

ANNABELLA [*earnestly*] Augusta . . . I *had* to learn . . .

AUGUSTA [*to* MRS. CLERMONT] I would not be in your shoes when he hears of this.

ANNABELLA [*urgently*] He must not know. . . . [*Takes bottle from* AUGUSTA.]

AUGUSTA. I don't know what to say. . . . Between you, you will drive him out of his wits . . . If he isn't half out of them already.

[*Sound of* BYRON'S *voice speaking to servant offstage.* MRS. CLERMONT *slips swiftly away passing* BYRON *in doorway and leaving bottle in* ANNABELLA'S *hands.* BYRON *comes into room.*]

BYRON [*looking from* ANNABELLA *to* AUGUSTA *darkly*] A sweet lot of conspirators. What are you hatching now?

AUGUSTA [*goes to him soothingly*] I had just come in. . . . I thought Bell alone. . . . [*She puts her hand on his arm. He shakes it off.*]

BYRON. The neglected wife! There's the play I'm seeking for Drury Lane. Why not write it for me, Bell? Begin with a sinister female scuttling off as the villainous husband enters . . . [*Sees that* ANNABELLA *holds one hand rather awkwardly behind her.*] What have you there? A letter from a lover? Does the play go on to bawdry? Never tell me the chaste Clermont is running Cupid's errands! That unviolated widow . . . —I'll wager lack of violation's the cause of her bile. She, to connive at an assignation!

ANNABELLA. Byron . . . I could forgive your cruelty sooner than your vulgarity.

BYRON [*moving toward her*] Render unto Cæsar, sweet . . .

AUGUSTA. Bell . . . don't be frightened . . . Moore was here . . . they have been drinking . . .

BYRON. I was born drunk, dear girl . . . and my father . . . and your father . . . before me. [*To* ANNABELLA *with sudden and violent menace.*] Give me whatever it is you are hiding!

ANNABELLA. You will regret this. [*He puts his hand behind her and catches her wrist. They struggle.*]

BYRON. Offer me some new divertissement! I have already regretted everything available! [*Laughs wildly.*]

ANNABELLA. Byron . . . shame . . . I am not strong! [*Appears to be almost in tears.*]

AUGUSTA. Shame, Byron! [*Ineffectual distress.*]

BYRON [*using one hand to force* ANNABELLA'S *grip on bottle, puts other to ear in mocking affectation*] Am I turned Narcissus . . . and does Echo call me? Shame, Byron . . . Byron, shame . . . shame . . . shame! [*Forces bottle from* ANNABELLA'S *hand and holds it up to the light. His ribaldry freezes slowly into black and murderous rage.*]

AUGUSTA [*terrified*] Byron . . . don't be so angry . . .

BYRON. Be quiet. [*He does not look at her. To* ANNABELLA.] You found this for yourself . . . or your spy found it for you?

ANNABELLA [*steeling herself to face him. No tears.*] My duty . . .

BYRON. I see—your duty. Not your love—nor your understanding—nor your faith . . . you have none of those in you.

AUGUSTA [*imploringly*] She cares . . . indeed she cares. . . .

BYRON. For her petty pride . . .

ANNABELLA [*temper breaking out suddenly*] Yours shall not destroy it.

BYRON. For her little petticoated god—that she makes in her own image.

ANNABELLA. You shall not blaspheme in my hearing!

BYRON [*to* AUGUSTA] See . . . he speaks through her lips . . . and I am expected to fall on my face and cry Allah . . . Il Allah! Is it any wonder that I look for a little temporary forgetfulness . . . where I can find it? [*Holds up bottle and stares at it with his face working.*]

AUGUSTA. Give it to me, Byron. . . . Give it to me! [*She goes to him. He holds her off with one hand.*] You shall have it back . . . if you must . . . you shall be the judge.

BYRON. And the jury and the prisoner before the bar . . . God help me! . . . Prisoner of Eternity! [*Laughs harshly.*]

ANNABELLA. I have had enough of this—more than I can bear . . .

BYRON. Than *you* can bear!

ANNABELLA. If you will not give it to Augusta—as your wife I have the right . . .

AUGUSTA. Bell . . . [*Agony of apprehension.*] don't . . . don't speak to him so . . .

BYRON. It is her only language. [ANNABELLA *takes a step toward him and with an abrupt gesture of ungovernable fury he flings the bottle down on the hearthstone where it shatters with a small crash. He stands above the wreckage for a moment staring down at it and breathing heavily then sets his heel upon it and grinds the fragments into dust. To* ANNABELLA.] I have set my heel upon the serpent's head. Does that satisfy your hunger and thirst after righteousness?

ANNABELLA. Byron, I sometimes despair of you. [*She looks at him for a moment then puts her hands up to her face and leaves the room.*]

BYRON [*looks at* AUGUSTA *for a moment in silence while his fury gradually subsides into the bitter quiet of emotional exhaustion. Speaks dryly.*] Hard to please, isn't she? [*He walks over to chair near tea-table and*

drops into it wearily. His face is drawn into haggard lines. He sits staring ahead of him as if into some inescapable abyss. AUGUSTA *follows . . . stands behind his chair. She puts her hands on his shoulders. Her face is full of suffering compassion.*]

AUGUSTA. My poor, poor Byron . . . [*She passes her fingers across his forehead.*] Why will you torture yourself?

BYRON. You are the only human being who loves me. [*He leans his head back against her. While he is speaking* MRS. CLERMONT *appears in the doorway. She stands for a moment unseen watching* BYRON *and* AUGUSTA *with an expression of deep and satisfied malevolence.*]

AUGUSTA [*simply*] It breaks my heart . . . to have you unhappy.

MRS. CLERMONT [*with impeccable respect*] If I may interrupt your lordship . . . [BYRON *gets to his feet at once, his face darkening.* AUGUSTA *draws back.*] Her ladyship wishes me to say that she will be leaving in the morning for a visit of a month to her parents . . . as your lordship suggested.

BYRON [*with controlled violence*] Very good . . . you will accompany her, Mrs. Clermont.

MRS. CLERMONT. I am quite prepared, sir.

BYRON. But when she returns you will *not* accompany her. [*Loses control for a murderous moment.*] *Get out of my sight!*

[MRS. CLERMONT *goes and turns hurriedly.*]

AUGUSTA [*shaking with fear*] Byron, that was not wise.

BYRON. She frightens you? [*Fire has died down in him. He is deadly weary.*]

AUGUSTA. She is forever at our heels. Something she may have seen—she means to speak—I feel it. [*She puts a hand up over her heart as if to quiet it.*]

BYRON. Who would believe her? [*Moment of frightful stillness.*] Can we ourselves believe it? [*They stand helpless staring into each other's eyes.*]

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

Scene III

Same as Scene II.
Time: *April 1816.*
When the curtain rises AUGUSTA *is seated at desk between windows writing. She looks tired and harassed. Presently she rises, goes to window and looks out, then turns and comes down to fireplace where bell-pull hangs. She is putting out her hand toward it when* FLETCHER *enters the room with letters.*

AUGUSTA. Has the post come, Fletcher?

FLETCHER. It's here, Mrs. Leigh. [*Hands her letters.*]

AUGUSTA [*shuffling through them anxiously*] Lord Byron has not returned?

FLETCHER. Not yet, ma'am.

AUGUSTA. I am expecting Mr. Hobhouse.

FLETCHER. Yes, Mrs. Leigh. [*Hesitates.*]

AUGUSTA [*kindly*] What is it, Fletcher?

FLETCHER. I wondered, ma'am, if you would care to suggest something his lordship might fancy for dinner tonight. He hasn't been eating as he should.

AUGUSTA. I know he hasn't. I only wish . . . [*Breaks off abruptly.*] . . . there's nothing I know of.

FLETCHER [*hopefully*] I've known him to fancy a bit of brawn . . .

AUGUSTA. Anything you think he might like. . . .

FLETCHER. I'll have a word with cook, ma'am. [*Goes out.*]

[AUGUSTA *goes to sofa, sinks down in corner of it with deep sigh and begins to open letters. Reading them her face draws into lines of agitation and distress.* FLETCHER *re-enters.* AUGUSTA *starts up.*]

AUGUSTA. Mr. Hobhouse?

FLETCHER. Mr. Moore.

AUGUSTA. Show him in.

[FLETCHER *goes out. Returns, ushering* MOORE *who comes forward at once and takes* AUGUSTA'S *hand warmly.*]

MOORE. Good afternoon, Mrs. Leigh. I thought I'd like a chat with Byron. . . .

AUGUSTA. He's been with his lawyers since just after luncheon. I expect him at any moment. [*Seats herself on sofa . . . gestures* MOORE *to do likewise.*]

MOORE. No change, I suppose, in Lady Byron's attitude?

AUGUSTA [*gesture of despair*] She still resolutely insists . . .

MOORE. Upon separation, eh? And Byron still refuses? More power to him!

AUGUSTA. He cannot believe that she speaks for herself. He is convinced that she is influenced by her parents . . . by Mrs. Clermont . . . by . . .

MOORE. Over three months now, isn't it? . . . [*Looks about the room thoughtfully.*]

AUGUSTA. I helped her pack her boxes. Byron locked them for her. There had been a quarrel but they parted in harmony. The day after she arrived at Kirkby-Mallory came the sweetest note . . .

MOORE. She must have found it hard after *that* to deny her Lord.

AUGUSTA. Within two weeks Sir Ralph had written Byron that her parents—her parents, you see?—could not feel themselves justified in permitting her return.

MOORE [*flinging out his hands*] After which—the Deluge. And no explanations.

AUGUSTA. That's the frightful part of it. He demands an explanation. She persistently refuses.

MOORE. And since she refuses, the world puts its own interpretation . . . a thousand times worse than poor reality. That's human nature. She cannot realize to what infamous slander her silence is subjecting him.

AUGUSTA. She can't help but realize. . . . All his old political enemies are after him now in full cry. They are out for his destruction. [*Agonized apprehension in her voice.*]

MOORE [*trying to comfort her*] Dear Mrs. Leigh . . . they were only waiting for an opportunity. And Byron's the man to give it to 'em. Before the House of Lords, by Gad . . . he takes the part of the workers! He flings down a glove to the Regent—you remember?

AUGUSTA. Oh, if he had never written that wretched little poem!

MOORE. And publicly owned it—what's more—reprinting it along with the Corsair. Now was not that

asking for trouble? Even the dullest ruler may have a memory.

AUGUSTA [*with dolorous pride*] Byron has a passion for candour.

MOORE. And that can be a damned dangerous indulgence . . . begging your pardon. If he hadn't been so candid in public about the narrow-mindedness of Mother Church . . . if he hadn't so bitterly lamented in striking verse the misfortunes of Napoleon . . . [*gets up and strides up and down inspired by his own eloquence.*] In short if he hadn't forever and always been a profuse magnificent minded fellow who doesn't wait for scales to weigh what he says . . . and whose heart and whose hand, God bless him, are always on the side of the under dog . . . no, no—your brother's too splendid a rebel to go unmarked!

AUGUSTA. He is paying for his rebellion. There is even talk . . . of unseating him in the House of Lords. You know all this of course . . . more perhaps than I do. I am sorry to run on so. I think of nothing else. . . . [*Rises and walks away, stifling her emotion.*]

MOORE [*following, touches her gently upon the arm*] He'll come out of it somehow. You'll see.

[*Enter* FLETCHER.]

FLETCHER. Mr. Hobhouse.

MOORE [*hurriedly*] Shall I be in the way? You've only to speak.

AUGUSTA. Do stay. Byron would be sorry not to see you. [*Enter* HOBHOUSE. AUGUSTA *goes forward to meet him. Gives him her hand.*] I'm sorry my brother has not yet

returned, Mr. Hobhouse.

HOBHOUSE. I'll wait if I may. Good afternoon, Moore.

MOORE. Byron's with Hanson, Mrs. Leigh tells me.

AUGUSTA. Byron's been bitterly offended by the wording of certain papers. . . .

HOBHOUSE [*grimly*] And rightly so. I never read a more insulting document than the deed of separation offered him. "Lord Byron will claim immediately a pecuniary profit of five hundred pounds per annum in consequence of his marriage with Lady B . . ."

AUGUSTA [*to* HOBHOUSE] He's learned it was Annabella herself who drew up that clause.

HOBHOUSE. It does not surprise me. There, in my opinion, is Lady Byron's personal attitude fully revealed.

AUGUSTA. I have a letter from her today . . . [*Suddenly recollecting.*] if you will forgive me . . . only a moment . . . [*Goes to desk, gathers up sheets she has been writing when* MOORE *came in and leaves the room hurriedly.*]

MOORE [*looking after her sighs and shakes his head*] Poor woman! She's almost beside herself.

HOBHOUSE. Well she may be! This has got beyond the stage of gossip. We're dealing with a conspiracy of lies. Byron's name on every dirty tongue in London—no story too filthy to damn him with. . . . I have talked with Lady Melbourne this afternoon.

MOORE. Surely she's not turned against him.

HOBHOUSE. She sent for me. She has confirmed a suspicion which has been in my mind for some weeks—As to the source of all these rumours.

MOORE. *Is* there a source?

HOBHOUSE. It once wore a page's jacket and breeches.

MOORE. Caro! I won't believe it. She is capable of almost any folly—but not that!

HOBHOUSE. You were among her satellites. She still blinds you.

MOORE. Byron brought a good deal of this upon himself, y'know. His two poems of separation . . . the one to his wife and the savage lampoon of the Clermont woman . . . when Caro got wind of those she wrote him at once . . . she warned him they would ruin him.

HOBHOUSE. She was in a position to know.

MOORE [*unconvinced*] But she implored him to suppress them.

HOBHOUSE. He showed them only to a few of his friends. How was it the journals got hold of them? How is it they are now the talk of our rotten world? [*Controls himself.*] If you want evidence of Lady Caroline's handiwork—it's on the way.

MOORE [*relapsing into despondency*] She never could have wished him such a downfall as this. Insult greets him the moment he puts his foot in the street. As well admit it . . . he's become a monster to the public eye.

HOBHOUSE. She has a book—almost ready for the publishers.

MOORE. I've heard but don't believe . . . [*Contemptuously indulgent.*] besides, who'd ever read her?

HOBHOUSE. She'll be on every bedside table in England when they recognize her satanic hero.

MOORE [*incredulous*] She'd never pillory herself. . . .

HOBHOUSE. She'll pillory herself in order to crucify him. He has happened upon two women—Caroline and Annabella—who do not know how to forgive.

MOORE [*despairingly*] What is he to do, Hobhouse?

HOBHOUSE [*incisively*] Take steps with no more delay to force an explanation from Lady Byron. It is her silence which is damning him. . . . She must be made to speak.

MOORE. She is a woman of stone. She won't be forced by him nor anyone else.

HOBHOUSE. There is a way.

[BYRON *enters and stands for a moment smiling pleasantly at* HOBHOUSE *and* MOORE *then comes limping slightly into the room.*]

BYRON. Mrs. Leigh tells me I've kept you both waiting. [*Claps* MOORE *on shoulder.*] Why so grim, Hobby? [*Seems to recollect.*] Sunday, of course . . . isn't it? There's a day I never had much pleasure of either.

MOORE [*a bit nervously*] Had you a satisfactory session with Hanson?

BYRON [*wearily*] Much like all the rest. Separation the last expedient . . . et cetera and so on . . . ad infinitum . . .

HOBHOUSE. Hanson is right.

BYRON. [*Drops down in chair, puts his head against the back for a moment and closes his eyes, then opens them, sits up and looks at* HOBHOUSE *and* MOORE *coolly.*] All the world's right . . . but me . . . and I cannot con-

vince it. So why not let the worm-eaten sphere roll on without my assistance.

[HOBHOUSE *draws up a chair and sits facing* BYRON *with dogged intention.*]

HOBHOUSE. Byron—you have wasted time enough . . .

BYRON. That's one reproach I never expected from you. . . . [*Smiles with amiable mockery.*] Will you have a glass of sherry, either or both of you? You seem a bit off colour today. The bell, Tom.

[MOORE *goes to the bell pull.*]

HOBHOUSE. I have been with Lady Melbourne.

BYRON. I hope she is in her usual good health.

HOBHOUSE [*bluntly*] She is deeply distressed at the course your affairs are taking.

BYRON. Her house has contributed generously to the cast of my Comedy. I can understand her interest. [*Enter* FLETCHER.] Bring the sherry, Fletcher.

[FLETCHER *goes out.*]

MOORE [*comes down and stands leaning on back of sofa.*] Don't take this too lightly, Byron. Hobhouse only this afternoon heard . . .

BYRON. Of that brilliant tale Glenarvon? . . . Where under heaven did she find such a name?

HOBHOUSE [*taken aback*] You know of it already, then?

BYRON. She selects a generous moment for its publication.

HOBHOUSE. You know the contents?

[FLETCHER *returns with decanter and glasses. Sets them on table.* BYRON *goes over, pours three glasses.*]

BYRON. Who doesn't?

MOORE [*warmly*] It is unthinkable . . . that at this moment she should pretend to draw *you* . . .

BYRON. Oh, as for the likeness, the picture can't be good. . . . I did not sit long enough. [*Offers glasses to* HOBHOUSE *and* MOORE. *They take them. He lifts his own.*] Here's a double health!

[*They drink and set the glasses down.* BYRON *stands at fireplace.* MOORE *sits in chair one side of fireplace.* HOBHOUSE *stands beside* BYRON.]

HOBHOUSE. Byron—you must let me speak frankly.

BYRON. He's no good at anything else, anyhow,—is he, Tom? [*He sounds tired but affectionate.*]

HOBHOUSE. This villainous book is only one more outrage. You have given your tormentors room enough . . . and to spare. It's time for you to act.

BYRON. Have you and Hanson been putting your heads together?

HOBHOUSE. I agree with him utterly. For you to accede to a separation without obtaining a statement of causes . . .

BYRON. You should have been a lawyer yourself . . . you have the jargon so pat . . .

HOBHOUSE. The thing's impossible. You are with me Moore?

MOORE. No shadow of a doubt, Byron.

BYRON. And what is it you suggest that I do . . . to arrive at this explanation?

HOBHOUSE. There's only one thing you *can* do—[*Breaks*

off abruptly.] I don't have to go into the unspeakable rumours now afloat . . .

BYRON. No—I think there are enough at work there without you.

HOBHOUSE [*deep agitation*] Byron . . . you will have to bring suit . . . there's no way out of it.

MOORE. He's right, Byron. Much as I hate to see her ladyship . . . in the divorce courts . . .

BYRON. Suit for restitution of conjugal rights . . . that's the technical term, I believe.

HOBHOUSE. It's the only way by which you can extort a specific charge.

BYRON. So I am to turn extortioner?

MOORE. It's no time for joking, man.

HOBHOUSE. It's the only way they've left you. They've refused your every offer of reconciliation. . . .

BYRON [*curiously quiet*] I have—from the first—attempted sincerely to be reconciled. . . . I have written her. She has not answered or she has answered like a stranger through her father—through my sister—through a covey of lawyers. Her advisers have declared that her lips are sealed. . . . Before God they are not sealed by me!

HOBHOUSE. The courts will unseal them fast enough.

BYRON. You think it the only way?

MOORE. You don't realize, Byron, what things are being said—what a storm her silence has raised against you.

BYRON. *I* do not realize? [*Looks at* MOORE *thoughtfully and smiles.*]

HOBHOUSE. In justice to yourself . . .

BYRON. I am to put the woman who has been my wife and is still the mother of my child in the stocks . . . for fools to gape at.

HOBHOUSE. She has done that—and worse—to you.

BYRON. I am too proud to be vindictive—as she has been . . . [*stops—frowns deeply—goes on*] I have believed her to be coerced. . . .

HOBHOUSE. It's time you resigned that belief. Her decision is obviously her own.

MOORE. I'm afraid there's no longer any room for doubt, old fellow.

BYRON. You both accept that for a fact, do you . . . ?

HOBHOUSE. You are dealing not with the father nor with the mother but with a ruthlessly determined woman . . . Lady Byron herself.

BYRON. That's your final opinion? [*Looks from one to the other.*]

[MOORE *nods unhappily.*]

HOBHOUSE. I see no room for any other.

BYRON. I should like to say once more . . . as I have said to you both already . . . that I am utterly ignorant of what her charges may be . . . or why they should be withheld.

HOBHOUSE. I believe you implicitly.

MOORE. A man'd be a fool to doubt you.

[*Enter* AUGUSTA . . . *hesitates in doorway and starts to turn back.*]

BYRON. Come in, Augusta.

[AUGUSTA *comes down to where others are standing.* MOORE *places a chair for her.* BYRON *sits down as well as if suddenly realizing his weariness.*]

HOBHOUSE. I have been saying to Byron, Mrs. Leigh, that his only hope of escape from the hellish position in which Lady Byron has placed him . . . [BYRON *moves as if to speak,* HOBHOUSE *silences him with a gesture of one hand.*] —too late for kinder words—is to bring suit and at once.

AUGUSTA. [*Pale and frightened.*] Take it all into court? Oh, Byron—

BYRON. I am not convinced, Augusta. [*His voice is steady. He does not look at her.*]

HOBHOUSE. Lady Melbourne has tried in vain to intercede. So has Lord Holland. So has Hodgson. . . . Meantime the hue and cry has been mounting. Further delay will be fatal to Byron's position in England. [*Significantly.*]

AUGUSTA [*faltering*] But to take it into court—wouldn't that mean . . .

HOBHOUSE. Your brother's good name his own again.

AUGUSTA. Byron—[*desperately*] perhaps you have no longer any choice.

BYRON. You would see Annabella publicly humiliated, would you?

AUGUSTA [*uncertainly*] She has had no mercy on you.

BYRON. I never asked it. I may have asked justice but was never fool enough to expect it.

AUGUSTA [*to* HOBHOUSE *with her customary flurried*

air.] It has seemed to me lately that they wished either to frighten or coax him . . .

HOBHOUSE. Let them face a suit. . . . That'll put an end to all this stabbing in the dark.

MOORE. Your sister's with us, Byron. [*Air of relief.*]

BYRON. I've a question to ask her, Tom. [*Pause in which he looks at* AUGUSTA *somberly and she looks back at him trembling.*] You knew Annabella well, Augusta. . . .

AUGUSTA. [*Nervously.*] I thought so. Her letters to me since she left here continue to be affectionate.

BYRON. Think well now. To your mind, is it she who desires this . . . amicable arrangement—[*Grimace of suffering.*] or is it those behind her? . . .

AUGUSTA [*after long and apprehensive pause*] At first I could not believe . . . I thought surely some mysterious influence . . .

BYRON [*deeply agitated*] For God's sake—plain English!

AUGUSTA [*surrendering*] There's no mistaking now . . . it's Annabella herself.

BYRON [*stands up abruptly and shoves back his chair*] I have said from the first . . . that once I were convinced the request for a private separation came from Lady Byron herself I would accede to her wishes.

HOBHOUSE. Are you mad?

BYRON [*laughs shortly*] There was to be no insanity in the bridegroom's family . . . remember Augusta?

MOORE. You can't do it, Byron . . . 'twill be the end of you.

BYRON. You have all three assured me that you believe Lady Byron to be acting for herself.

HOBHOUSE. If you sign that deed of private separation you sign away all power of ever defending yourself against the blackest lies in Christendom. You will be a ruined man.

BYRON. I signed it this afternoon.

AUGUSTA [*terrified, starts to her feet*] Byron—what have you done! [*She breaks into weeping—covers her face with her hands.*]

BYRON [*mocking*] So shines a good deed in a naughty world!

HOBHOUSE. England will be too small to hold you.

BYRON. England's looked her last on me. [*He is obviously under terrific strain but controlled.*] I always meant, y'know, Hobby, to go back to Greece. . . . [*With an abrupt gesture of deep emotion* HOBHOUSE *puts out his hand.* BYRON *clasps it. Smiles his old charming smile.*] Have I ever told you that I once swam the Hellespont?

CURTAIN

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

Scene I

Place: HOBHOUSE'S study.
Time: *1823.*
When the curtain rises HOBHOUSE *is seated behind desk, papers and writing materials about.* MOORE *is seated beside desk.* HOBHOUSE *is searching in drawers of desk.*

HOBHOUSE. Did I never show it to you?

MOORE. Only this minute heard of it.

HOBHOUSE. I have it here, I'm sure. Saw it just the other day.

MOORE. It sounds quite mad . . . but none the less like Byron.

HOBHOUSE. As usual there was method in his madness. [*Finds paper and holds it up as if about to read.*] We had all of us, it seems . . . you too . . . been somewhat neglectful of him at the time. . . .

MOORE. [*Impatiently.*] Go on man . . . read!

HOBHOUSE. It is signed "yours faithfooly to command" and of course the whole thing purports to have been written by Fletcher.

MOORE. Yes, yes, go on!

HOBHOUSE [*reading*] Venice, June 1818.

MOORE. Venice, eh? So long ago as that.

HOBHOUSE. With his world about his ears . . . to play

a practical joke!

MOORE. He managed to keep his world staring, didn't he? Venice as well as London? Lucifer, son of the morning . . . living in sin on the Grand Canal . . . with a palace full of Italian huzzies. Working though . . . working while he wenched . . . Manfred . . . more of Childe Harold . . . the beginning of Don Juan . . .

HOBHOUSE. Well, that phase is over, thank heaven . . . in any case here's the letter. [*Reads.*] "Sir . . . With great grief I inform you of the death of my late dear master, my Lord . . ."

MOORE. Fletcher to the life! [*Chuckles.*]

HOBHOUSE. ". . . who died this morning at ten of the clock of a rapid decline and a slow fever . . ."

MOORE [*laughing*] The perfect paradox.

HOBHOUSE. Wait . . . "caused by anxiety, sea-bathing, women and riding in the sun against my advice." [*He and* MOORE *laugh together. He runs his eye down the page.*] Here's the meat of the jest. . . . "My master suffered his illness with great patience except that when in extremity he twice damned his friends and said they were selfish rascals . . . you, sir, particularly . . . [*chuckles*] . . . who never answered his letters nor complied with his repeated requests."

MOORE. What had you been forgetting to forward?

HOBHOUSE. Oh, tooth-brushes, most likely. . . . Macassar oil . . . once a bull-dog . . . once a life of Richard III. I believe he was two years after me for that. [*Reads again.*] "My Lord had several physicians but no priest . . . "

MOORE. Nicely in character.

HOBHOUSE. ". . . his nine whores are already provided for . . . and the other servants."

MOORE. Good Lord—not really! [*Laughs loudly.*]

HOBHOUSE. "But what is to become of me . . . his Vally de Sham?" [*Folds letter and turns it about in his hand.*] More to the same effect. Full of his most outrageous punning.

MOORE. The boy in Byron has never quite gone under—bless him! In his darkest days . . .

HOBHOUSE [*change of tone . . . drops reminiscence —speaks briskly.*] Thank God his darkest days are over! He knows by now that he has been unanimously elected a member of the Greek Committee here in London . . . implored to go to Greece . . . help her to freedom . . .

MOORE. Always his dream. You think he'll go?

HOBHOUSE. He sails about July . . . if his plans hold. He's chartered a ship. Fletcher goes with him, of course . . . Trelawney . . . a young doctor named Bruno . . . [*pause*] quite unknown—I hope he's reliable. Then Pietro Gamba . . .

MOORE. That's the Countess Guiccioli's younger brother, eh? Is Byron quite clear of *her?* After all . . . the last three years in Italy . . . he's been pretty well tied to her apron strings. I know whereof I speak, Hobhouse. . . . I visited him in 1819, remember . . . at La Mira. I met the lady herself. A soothing blonde—in her twenties—married to a wealthy noble a mere forty years older than herself.

HOBHOUSE. She was never any more to Byron than salve

on a wound. He has forgotten her. So must we. He means to wipe the slate now—that's plain. Let him once put out to sea again! The freedom of Greece . . . that will be his vindication.

MOORE. He's come a hard way . . . but his day's breaking.

HOBHOUSE [*slowly*] There have been suggestions that when Greece attains her independence . . . he may be king.

MOORE [*with amazement and delight*] *Byron?*

HOBHOUSE. It's not impossible.

MOORE. Nothing's impossible—to a spirit like his.

HOBHOUSE. There will be risks, of course. The Turks . . . treachery . . .

MOORE. Nonsense! He thrives upon risks. Think of it man! By God, it's magnificent! The greatest poet of his day offering his time—his fortune . . . his genius itself . . . upon the altar of liberty!

HOBHOUSE. When he gives—he gives with both hands.

MOORE. Greece . . . after all these years. To go back so gloriously! I've heard him say time and again 'twas the only place he was ever contented in.

HOBHOUSE. This is the thing he'd have asked for—at any time since we first laid eyes on Athens together. I know him! [*Restrained exultation.*]

MOORE. The old Corsair! By the way, you knew of course that the fifteenth and sixteenth cantos of Don Juan arrived some weeks ago.

HOBHOUSE [*proudly*] I have read them. There's no

one above him but Shakespeare and Milton.

MOORE. The greatest comic poem in our language—that's Don Juan! It flutters the dove-cotes though. It shocks the press.

HOBHOUSE. When did that ever stop him? Well—he won't be writing poetry in Greece.

MOORE. He'll be living it. As even he has never lived it before. I envy him, you know . . . when all's said and done. For a man to come to his great adventure . . . in his prime . . . at the peak of his powers. He's only thirty-six . . . well . . . I must get back to my Bess.

HOBHOUSE. I hope Mrs. Moore is well.

MOORE. A touch of headache . . . a slight migraine. She likes me with her. What are you doing there?

[HOBHOUSE *has* BYRON'S *letter still in his hands. Without thinking he has begun to tear it up. Now he stops and looks at it thoughtfully.*]

HOBHOUSE. You think it worth saving? Only a hoax.

MOORE. Even a hoax—of *his* . . .

HOBHOUSE [*with faint uneasiness*] You're right, Tom. Even a hoax!

CURTAIN

EPILOGUE

Scene II

Place: *Missolonghi*
Time: *1824.*
byron's *chamber in Missolonghi . . . squalid, with damp-stained walls . . . two windows at rear looking out on mud-flats and marshes. Low narrow bed at left of stage near centre . . . table next bed with doctor's paraphernalia. Door at right opening into corridor. Door beyond bed at left opening into inner room. Sky beyond windows is filled with yellowish light of storm coming on. When curtain rises* byron *is standing at window looking out.* doctor bruno *beside him supporting him. Presently* byron *turns leaning heavily on* bruno's *arm; he goes over to bed and with* bruno's *help lays himself down. He closes his eyes at once and seems to collapse.* bruno *stands looking down at him for a moment and then sighs heavily and turns toward door at right. As he does so, door opens and* dr. millingen *enters.* bruno *goes forward to meet him. They stand near door and converse in lowered voices. Both are young . . . both desperately frightened.*

millingen. He is asleep?

bruno. It is not sleep. . . . I have never seen . . . [*Breaks into Italian, incoherent and agitated which* millingen *cannot understand.* millingen *equally agitated gestures* bruno *to be silent.*]

MILLINGEN. If we had not bled him the third time . . .

BYRON [*contemptuous voice*] You are a damned set of butchers. Take away as much blood as you will but have done with it.

BRUNO [*goes quickly in terror to the bed but* BYRON *does not stir.* BRUNO *goes back to* MILLINGEN.] His eyes are closed.

BYRON. You don't know what's wrong with me . . . that's the truth of it.

[PIETRO GAMBA . . . *Italian several years younger than* BYRON *enters very carefully . . . manner full of intense anxiety.*]

GAMBA. He is better now? [*Sees no encouragement in doctors' faces—despairs.*] What will you do?

MILLINGEN. What indeed—that we have not done? Leeches . . . cold compresses . . . nothing relieves him for long, Signor Gamba.

BYRON [*groan of suffering*] Ah, Christi! [*As he speaks,* PARRY, *thickset, sturdy Englishman, comes into room. He has been a firemaster in Royal Navy.* BYRON *has made him a major.*]

PARRY. What have you done to him now? [*Goes at once to the bed.*] You fools! . . . the bandage is too tight. [*Loosens bandage about* BYRON'S *head. Stands looking down at* BYRON *with great tenderness.*] I hope you will be better now, my lord.

BYRON [*gropes for* PARRY'S *hand*] Send the others away . . . you stay with me, Parry.

[GAMBA *leaves room very gently.*]

PARRY. Every possible moment. [*Glares at* BRUNO *and* MILLINGEN *standing distraught and irresolute on the other side of the room.*]

BYRON. I thought I heard . . . commotion . . . below . . . more trouble among the soldiers?

PARRY. Nothing I cannot quiet. They are always after more money. No matter what you give them.

BYRON. They broke in here . . . raging . . . demanding their rights.

PARRY. You handled them like a king, my lord.

BYRON. A king? . . . [*Pause.*] I have had offers, Parry . . .

PARRY [*deeply moved*] No offer could be worthy of you.

BYRON. I do not think that—literature—was my vocation.

MILLINGEN [*low but urgent and antagonistic comes to side of bed.* BRUNO *follows.*] I must ask you not to disturb his lordship any longer, Major Parry. He needs rest.

PARRY. You've done your best to kill him—all these bleedings. [*Angrily.*]

[BRUNO *begins flood of suppressed protest in Italian.* LUCA, *young Greek boy, comes into room from door at right. He goes at once to* PARRY.]

LUCA. Major Parry . . .

[BRUNO *continues to protest.*]

PARRY [*loudly*] Quiet—for God's sake!

LUCA [*to* PARRY] Signor Gamba . . .

PARRY [*impatiently*] Very well, Luca . . . tell him

I'm coming. Is there no one in this place but myself to get anything done?

[LUCA *goes out.* PARRY *turns away beckoning* BRUNO *and* MILLIGEN *to follow. Stops at far side of the room. The three stand close together—speak in lowered voices still with general effect of confusion and panic.*]

PARRY. Give him brandy.

MILLINGEN. It would be fatal.

PARRY [*grimly*] Then stop worrying and starving him to death.

BRUNO. You are not a doctor . . .

PARRY. Thank God for that! I'm a plain man with average common-sense and I'll tell you . . .

BRUNO [*agitated*] You can tell me nothing . . . niente . . .

MILLINGEN. Quiet, Doctor Bruno . . . Lord Byron must have quiet!

BYRON [*angrily*] Do you think I have no lucid intervals? . . . [*More quietly as if to himself.*] I was a fool ever to come here . . . but being here I must see what's to be done. [*Pause.*] So we'll go no more a'roving . . .

PARRY [*savagely to doctors*] Curse your ignorance! . . . At least treat him like an English gentleman . . .

MILLINGEN. Brandy, that is to say? [*Insolently.*]

PARRY. Exactly.

BRUNO. No-no-no!

PARRY. Make him sleep. Make him eat. Give him stimulants. He's had nothing but his superb spirit to keep him going . . . every discouragement imaginable . . .

these attacks and nothing to help him weather 'em. . . .

MILLINGEN. Signor Gamba is waiting for you, I believe, Major Parry.

[*Re-enter* LUCA.]

LUCA. If Doctor Millingen will speak with the book . . .

MILLINGEN. I'll be back shortly, Doctor Bruno. [*Goes not without relief.* LUCA *goes as well.* PARRY *stands looking toward bed and scowling unhappily.*]

PARRY. This weather's no help to him either. The damned sirocco. . . . Four days like this . . .

BRUNO. I have never seen such a case . . . nothing in my experience. . . . [*Painfully trying to explain.*] Typhus? . . . No! Rheumatic fever? . . . No!

PARRY. [*Gesture of despair and helplessness.*] Well . . . we must do what we can. But— [*threateningly*] no more blood-letting mind you! [*Goes out.*]

[BRUNO *goes over to* BYRON'S *bed . . . while he stands there irresolute looking down at* BYRON, FLETCHER *comes in from door to inner room.* FLETCHER *comes to bedside as well.*]

FLETCHER [*tragic anxiety*] His lordship is better, Doctor Bruno?

BRUNO. I cannot say . . . chi lo sa? [*Shrugs helplessly.*]

FLETCHER. For God's sake, is he better or ain't he?

BRUNO [*with heart-broken simplicity*] I do not know, Fletcher. Your master . . . he is very ill . . . his mind —it is not there. [*Taps forehead.*]

FLETCHER. Why did he ever come here? Nothing fit for

him to eat or drink . . . nothing but rocks, robbers and vermin in the whole of Greece! [*Shuffles despairingly.*]

BYRON. This is a fine scene!

[FLETCHER *starts violently.*]

FLETCHER. Your lordship . . . can you hear me?

BRUNO. He does not know you are here.

BYRON [*with sudden wildness*] Forward . . . avanti . . . follow *me!*

BRUNO. Go away, Flet-cher . . . I will watch . . . go back into the other room. Perhaps he will sleep.

BYRON. Fletcher.

FLETCHER [*distracted eagerness*] Here I am, my Lord! [*Thunder rolls far away.*]

BYRON. Leaps the live thunder! [*Ghost of his old laugh.*]

FLETCHER. Here I am sir . . . [*imploringly*] Was there anything you wanted?

BRUNO. I tell you he does not know you. [*Tries to urge* FLETCHER *away.*]

BYRON [*like one groping through a fog—speaks slowly—*] Fletcher . . . I must speak to you . . . alone.

FLETCHER [*excitedly*] Yes, your lordship . . . [*Gestures* BRUNO *frantically to leave.*]

[BRUNO *goes with reluctance. During this scene the storm is growing closer. Occasional lightning flashes.*]

BYRON. Take my hand. . . . [FLETCHER *does so.*] You will be provided for.

FLETCHER [*brokenly*] For God's sake, my lord . . . never mind that now!

BYRON. It is nearly over. Hear my last wishes.

FLETCHER [*gasps and drops his hand*] Let me get pen and paper, your lordship. . . .

BYRON. No time . . . no time . . . stay by me . . . [FLETCHER *sobs.*] Mind you execute my orders. [*Mutters unintelligibly for some seconds then speaks suddenly clear.*] My child . . . Ada . . . Give her—my blessing. . . . If I could have seen her!

FLETCHER [*crouching beside the bed . . . almost out of his wits with terror, listening.*] Let me call the doctors . . .

BYRON. Alone . . . alone . . . [*Stretches out a weak hand again and detains him.*] Go to Lady Byron and say . . . [*Long pause in which the boy* LUCA *comes to the door on a message, looks in and* FLETCHER *signals him frantically to go away. He does so.*] Who was that?

FLETCHER. The Greek boy.

BYRON. Tell her everything. . . .

FLETCHER [*wildly*] Tell who, your lordship?

BYRON [*with agonized slowness*] Tell Lady Byron . . . what I have told you . . . see her and say . . .

FLETCHER. Tell Lady Byron . . . yes, your lordship . . . [*hangs on* BYRON'S *words*]

BYRON. Go to—my sister . . .

FLETCHER [*straining to follow him*] Go to Mrs. Leigh . . . [BYRON *is silent.*] Your lordship! [*desperately*] . . .

BYRON. Huzza, Hobby—we are going!

FLETCHER. The doctor . . . one moment . . . I'll fetch the doctor . . .

BYRON [*clearly*] Stay where you are. Fletcher—if you do not execute every order which I have given you I will torment you hereafter . . . if possible . . . [*faint chuckle*]

FLETCHER [*in complete terror*] I am to go to Lady Byron . . . and to Mrs. Leigh . . .

BYRON [*mutters brokenly again*] Augusta . . . I speak not . . . Ada . . . my wife . . . you know my wishes, Fletcher. . . . [*long pause in which* FLETCHER *stares stricken into* BYRON'S *face.*] Now I have told you all.

FLETCHER. My Lord—I have not understood a word.

BYRON [*raises himself on his elbow staring back. He is deathly pale.*] You have not understood. . . .

FLETCHER. No, my lord . . . [*implores him*] tell me once again.

BYRON [*with superhuman effort*] My wife . . . my sister . . . my child . . . you must say . . . what I have told you. . . .

FLETCHER [*desperately*] I have not understood . . .

BYRON. Then all's lost . . . it's too late. . . . [*looks about him with incredulous realization. Cries out in ultimate anguish of despair.*] I leave something dear in the world! [*Sinks back slowly against his pillows.*]

[*A heavy peal of thunder follows on his words as the storm breaks. The boy* LUCA *comes back into the doorway . . . stands watching with tears streaming down his face.*]

LUCA. Is the great man dead?

CURTAIN

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